

# Aide-de-Camp's Library



सत्यमेव जयते

Rashtrapati Bhavan  
New Delhi

Accn. No. 1 241

Call No. 111 61-5

\_\_\_\_\_





DARTMOOR IN ALL ITS MOODS



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

MOONLIGHT TALES

"Mr. Gordon presents us with reality among bird and animal life. . . . Each tale is a delight."—*Morning Post*.





IN THE TOR CROWNED LAND

*From a water colour painting by Lord Gortll*

# DARTMOOR IN ALL ITS MOODS

BY DOUGLAS GORDON

LONDON

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

*First Edition . . . 1931*

## CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I    WILD DARTMOOR . . . . .	1
II   CUSTOMS AND PEOPLE . . . . .	15
III  THE DARTMOOR COMMONS . . . . .	34
IV   SPORTING RIGHTS AND GAME-BIRDS . . . . .	49
V    MISTS AND MIRES . . . . .	66
VI   BY LONELY STREAMS . . . . .	85
VII  DARTMOOR FAUNA. THE SMALLER ANIMALS . . . . .	106
VIII BADGERS AND OTHER THINGS . . . . .	123
IX   FOXES . . . . .	150
X    SILVER TONGUES . . . . .	178
XI   DARTMOOR'S GRIM RAVEN . . . . .	202
XII  PIRATES OF THE MOOR . . . . .	224
XIII THE MINOR ORCHESTRA. . . . .	253
XIV  VIPERS . . . . .	269
XV   DARTMOOR HUNTING . . . . .	283
XVI  ARCTIC DARTMOOR. . . . .	311
XVII DARTMOOR FLORA . . . . .	325

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
In the Tor-crowned Land. . . . . <i>Frontispiece</i> <i>From a water-colour painting by Lord Gorell.</i>	
Sundown on the Hill-tops . . . . . <i>From a water-colour painting by Lord Gorell.</i>	18
Ring-ouzel at her Nest having just Fed her Young . . . <i>From a photograph by Frances Pitt.</i>	94
A Family Party : Father Heads the Procession . . . <i>From a photograph by Richard Reason.</i>	122
"Listening !" Badger at the Waterside . . . . . <i>From a photograph by Frances Pitt.</i>	144
"Qui Vive ?" A Dartmoor Litter . . . . . <i>From a photograph by Richard Reason.</i>	166
The Home of the Jackdaws . . . . . <i>From a water-colour painting by Lord Gorell.</i>	226
A Road across the Moor . . . . . <i>From a water-colour painting by Lord Gorell.</i>	306

## FOREWORD

IN offering this book to the public, it is essential that its scope and object should be expressly defined. Having endeavoured to present a characteristic picture of Dartmoor in every setting, I have sedulously avoided those fields of study which have already been so exhaustively explored by former writers. For this reason no reference has been made to antiquities and ancient history, legendary or otherwise, except in cases when such allusions have some special bearing upon present-day conditions, or where a certain amount of retrospect lends additional interest to the subjects under notice.

The book is not in any sense a Dartmoor encyclopedia or guide-book, so many volumes of that description being already on the market. Its aim is rather to present the Moor as it is to-day, in its many moods and aspects, giving some account of its people and their ways; of the birds and beasts that still inhabit its primitive fastnesses, together with the many problems arising from inevitably changing conditions.

The work embodies the result of long observation and intimate knowledge of the country and its inhabitants. It should be pointed out, however, that in certain instances expressions foreign to the district have been employed for purposes of elucidation. By way of example, the word "shepherd", unknown upon Dartmoor, occurs frequently in the text for the cogent reason that the local vocabulary does not contain its equivalent.



My grateful acknowledgements are due to Mr. E. J. F. Tozer and Mr. T. Ormston Pease for statistics and documents generously supplied. I am also much indebted to Mr. Richard Dunning, of Throwleigh, for a great deal of information which his life-long and extensive experience of Dartmoor under almost every condition has rendered invaluable.

DOUGLAS GORDON.

STICKLEPATH,

*May* 27th, 1931

## CHAPTER I

### WILD DARTMOOR

Not long ago, an eminent statesman defined that tract of country called Dartmoor as "a bleak mist-sodden upland", and the description is singularly apt, as far as it goes. It portrays, however, one aspect only of the many moods to which the fickle spirit of this mountainous waste is prone. The "black mists" and the bleakness of utter desolation are there indeed, inseparable from the atmosphere of rugged heights, still remote from the softening influences of civilization. There, too, however, is a boundless fascination, and a beauty of necessity austere, for even in her gentler moods the spirit of the Moor is grim if not sinister. In the latter expression, perhaps, lies the keynote to the true Dartmoor atmosphere. This quality indeed is never entirely absent. Even when the landscape is bathed in its full warmth of summer sunshine and colour there is a lurking sense of menace, of grim possibility, as when one views some fierce beast in repose. This is doubtless partly due to the fact that in the wilder and more remote districts there is frequently little evidence of life, and the profound and eerie stillness, occasioned largely by the absence of all sound common to the ordinary countryside, has invested this

region with a sense of peculiar loneliness and desolation. Its effect upon strangers at times is remarkable. They appear to be more or less overcome by an indefinable feeling of oppression that weighs upon them with a tangible presence, and even without the demoralizing influence of the sudden and bewildering mists which constitute Dartmoor's principal danger, they have been known to abandon themselves for lost when in doubt as to their immediate whereabouts.

Only a short time ago I was crossing one of the wilder areas accompanied by a visitor, who, being well acquainted with the northern moors and mountains, seemed scarcely likely to fall a victim to this strange weakness. We had proceeded for a considerable while in silence—a common state when crossing the difficult peat “veins”—when my companion suddenly uttered an expression of obviously heart-felt relief. It was occasioned by nothing more gratifying than the mere sight of a moor pony, the only living thing—or so I was assured—that we had seen within the past hour, and the depression engendered by the utter solitude had apparently become almost unbearable.

This suggestion of the sinister is intensified not only by the absence of life, but by the all-too-obvious presence of death. One cannot walk far across the great wastes of rock and bog without coming upon the gruesome skeletons of ponies, bullocks and sheep that have died from accident or disease, and whose bleached bones, gleaming white amongst the flush of the heather or upon the parched hillside, provide eloquent testimony of fiercer Dartmoor's ruthlessness.

Apart from this almost unique sense of desolation and savage solitude, the atmosphere of the Moor is perhaps best described in the single apt line from *Dartmoor Days* :

Illimitable, wild and free,

and nowhere else, I think, in England to-day can one experience quite the same sense of silent, breezy vastness, strangely foreign to the cramped and homely atmosphere of our noisy, overcrowded little island.

An epoch of modernizing and advancement has revolutionized rural England to such an extent that little of the wild now remains. But here upon these great rolling heights, grey with the bleaching of ages, where the footprints of bygone races are scarcely obliterated, one is still face to face with the primitive. The black-cock, startled by the stranger's step, calls from the hollow. So, doubtless, his kind challenged the Celtic bowman many centuries ago. And what has changed since then ? Not the grand old tors ; not the grey and barren slopes ; not the very rock upon which one leans. Still they stand, unaltered all, save for the slow wear of eternity, since the great upheaval.

In Dartmoor's grey antiquity lies much of her romance, and it is the complete absence of the artificial element that appeals so strongly to the Nature-lover. It is true that for soft beauty and wealth of colouring the Devonian highlands compare but poorly with the northern moors. On the other hand, it must be admitted that conditions upon a carefully preserved and well-keepereed grouse

moor can scarcely be described as "natural". Shooting-butts, artistically designed, present no disfigurement to the landscape. None the less, they constitute a constant reminder of human supervision and workmanship, while the consistent and systematically regulated growth of the heather, for all its beauty and fragrance, cannot but suggest a cultivated crop.

It is in this latter connection that Dartmoor excels. Her extensive wastes, particularly the great area lying north of Postbridge and Princetown, remain for the most part as Nature made them. No thoroughfare destroys their solitude, and the few evidences of the human element are sufficiently crude and primitive to enhance rather than detract from the wild character of the landscape. The one factor that restricts the amenities of this almost untouched area is the artillery range, which intersects the northern district from Okehampton to the Dart, and the necessary though none the less unsightly erections and other evidence of military activity provide the one jarring note. Even so, the presence of the artillery is not an unmixed blessing from the Moor-lover's point of view, since the shell-swept area remains more or less immune from heather-fires, while the rough tracks constructed for military purposes facilitate access to these otherwise trackless regions when the ranges are clear. Gun-practice never takes place upon Saturdays, Sundays, or Bank Holidays, and there are frequent "open" periods to permit the change of batteries and for other causes; and since the firing season only extends over the summer months, for the greater

part of the year the ranges are accessible to the public.

The principal effect of the gun-practice, so far as the general public is concerned, lies in the fact that, when in progress, it prevents the conventional pilgrimage to Cranmere Pool, which, during recent years, has developed into a *sine qua non* among able-bodied visitors to all the moorland districts. This proceeding has been too frequently described to require further details as to the stereotyped programme. The little depression in whose bank the famous letter-box has been deposited lies in the north-western corner of the great bog generally known as the Cranmere Morass. In spite of much that has been said about the difficulties of access, it may be approached with perfect ease and comfort from the northern or eastern quarters by following the main valley of the West Okement, bearing always to the left when converging coombes leave any doubt as to the way. By adopting this course one avoids the wearying necessity of continuous jumping across the fissures in the peat, and there is even very little swampy ground to impede progress.

Cranmere Pool—so called for courtesy's sake—is the official source of this stream, and it is probable that the little hollow was at some previous date a pool in the more literal sense. Various theories have been advanced to account for the escape of the water. It is obvious, however, that the leakage was effected by no other means than the gradual wear of time, since the channel is far too long and deeply fretted to be other than purely natural.

The correct interpretation of the word "Cran-

mere" has given rise to some discussion. Burt claims its derivation from *crau* or *cran*, denoting a stream, while De Luc, on the other hand, interprets it as "the Place of Cranes", and his theory is strengthened by the fact that the heron, which probably haunted the Moor to a greater extent in bygone years, is known by no other name than that of "Crane" in West-Country parlance. It is possible, again, that the genuine bird was accredited with residence upon these wild uplands long after its banishment from England as a whole. Even to-day the ordinary countryman continues to regard the Moor as the home of everything peculiarly wild or outlandish; the source of the thunderstorm, the cloud-burst, excessive cold or rain. Should "the wind get back to Dartmoor", irrespective of direction, boisterous weather is predicted, and upon the same principle, if the mountain mist "comes in", or, in other words, drifts down from the hills, storms will follow. When it recedes, upon the other hand, by common consent the inclement conditions are supposed to have retired into their own regions, and fair weather may be expected. Rare or migrating birds also originate from the lonely, mysterious hills. Only last season a local farmer told me with all seriousness that he never expected a woodcock in his coverts until snow lay upon Dartmoor, which he regarded as their main breeding-place.

Geographically, Dartmoor is a barren area extending over some two hundred square miles. Historically, it is an ancient royal forest, which, having passed to the Dukes of Cornwall, should in strict accuracy be termed a "chase". Geologically, it is

an area whose mineral wealth has never yet been exhaustively explored. Archæologically, it is a country offering an almost unrivalled field to the antiquarian, and etymologically, it is "the land of many waters", giving birth to no less than fifty-three streams of varying sizes.

It is indeed above all things a country of brooks and rivers. The music of running water more often than not is the only sound that can be heard among the lonely hills and coombes, and of all the moorland symphonies it is the most characteristic—the only voice that, summer or winter alike, is seldom hushed. Not the least-beautiful feature of the landscape is the wild rocky stream, whether dark or swollen in times of flood, or crystal clear in the summer noonday heat. Yet in more ways than one these gem-bright streams are typical of the Moor, for they, too, have their sinister side. The stranger, hot and foot-sore from long scrambling over bog and boulder, is frequently tempted to slake his thirst at some clear reach, which, rippling over its granite bed, presents the appearance of benevolence itself. They who know these bright streams well, however, shun them as the very waters of Lethe, for such indeed they well may prove. They are in truth the graveyards of the Moor, as deadly as the mires themselves, and there is not an upland stream whose deep dark pools do not contain many grim secrets. I once saw two youths drink deeply from a clear fast-flowing stream whose purity nobody dreamed of questioning, and a minute or two later, in a still pool not a gunshot above, saw the gruesome corpses of three Scotch sheep, in a decidedly forward stage



of decomposition. The warning cannot be too strictly emphasized. The streams prove fatal to a great many sheep, particularly in spring. In weak condition from dearth of pasturage, and heavy with their fleeces, they frequently slip from the rocks when browsing, or fall short at a jump when attempting to cross, and once in deep water, there is little hope for them if the banks are steep. I have extricated many from desperate predicaments in which they must quickly have perished if undiscovered.

Incidentally, there is never any occasion to drink from a Dartmoor stream, since the purest water can always be obtained by the exercise of a little patience and trouble. In practically any rocky valley, and frequently within a few yards of the brooks themselves, there are springs, the presence of which is indicated by the sphagnum tussocks which almost invariably accumulate round their sources, and by clearing a little space one may obtain an unlimited supply of beautiful water within a few minutes.

There are indeed many branches of moor-craft, the acquisition and exercise of which may conceivably make all the difference between comfort and the reverse. Not the least useful is the faculty which some men possess of steering an easy course across country where the novice is in constant difficulties. There is a quite erroneous convention to the effect that the hall-mark of a greenhorn is to follow a bridlepath or cattle-track where such exist, while the man to the manner born takes a direct line from point to point. Actually, this is the reverse of the truth. More often than not upon Dartmoor the short cut is the long way round, and

it is the born moorman who takes advantage of the sheep or cattle-paths, having proved by long experience that they invariably follow the easiest and therefore the quickest course. This is particularly the case when fording streams. Sheep have their conventional crossing-places, where jumping from boulder to boulder presents no great difficulty, and these prove a great source of convenience to men who know their whereabouts. In this respect Dartmoor streams are peculiarly deceptive. Though plentifully strewn with rocks, there is usually the wide channel where the flow is deepest and swiftest, and too often the apparently simple proves impossible upon closer inspection.

The atmosphere of Dartmoor extends far beyond her mere geographical boundaries. It haunts the banks of every stream whose waters had birth far up on the wastes of Cranmere, and still adheres to every heathery slope, patch of shaggy wood or wild hillside which once formed part of the great primeval wilderness known as the "Common of Devonshire". A wilderness indeed must this part of the country have been when the old Lords of Dartmoor rode to the chase of deer and wolf attended by their knights and nobles, and William of Malmesbury wrote his chronicles of English History. Compared with the civilized England of modern times the whole of this wide district is wild still, and even to-day the spirit of the ancient Forest survives unconquered by changing conditions. There is nothing so tenacious as moorland, and since all the uplands of Devonshire can be described as outcrops of the same great waste, an exceedingly short space of time would suffice to

enable the country to recover its original character. Practically adjoining my garden is a field which, originally reclaimed from the Moor, five years ago bore a heavy crop of potatoes. Abandoned to rough pasturage, it is now thickly overgrown with gorse, already waist-high, and there is nothing whatever to distinguish it from the surrounding heath. The same might be said of the numberless abandoned intakes that one sees upon all sides, and which are valueless to their owners apart from the negative satisfaction of possession.

The much-discussed expression "Forest" is so obviously a mere survival of an old title, and has been so effectively dealt with by earlier writers that it requires no comment. It is also, I think, sufficiently obvious that the great expanse of wind-swept upland can never have been heavily timbered, at least during the existing state of climatic conditions. To this the stunted character of the few trees that contrive to grow upon the high moorland bears ample testimony, and for the same reason it seems probable that the afforestation schemes now in progress upon certain parts of the Moor are foredoomed to failure, or to partial success at best. It is clear that trees of various sorts will grow in sheltered localities where there is sufficient depth of soil, but not as a rule above the level of cultivation. Ground which possesses sufficient fertility for the rearing of crops would seem to be equally suitable for the growth of trees, as in the Tenement Country, for example, where planting has been undertaken with apparent success. The high moorland as a whole, however, presents a very different problem.

It is the exposed character of the country rather than actual altitude that is so detrimental to growth, and even if trees attain any height, they are so warped and misshapen as to be of little value for timber. Characteristic examples may be seen in the comparatively recent plantings around Fernworthy, where trees in exposed positions have made but slight headway, whereas others upon sheltered slopes—notably Scotch firs—have in some cases attained a height of twenty feet. The larches in the main are insignificant.

Whether afforestation upon an extensive scale will ever be attempted depends probably upon the final success or failure of this and other ventures now under consideration. It is understood that the Duchy of Cornwall contemplates the leasing of 1,329 acres of moorland in the Believer and Laughter districts to the Forestry Commission, and the proposal to bring another 5,000 acres under this scheme has given rise to considerable dissatisfaction throughout the countryside. That such an undertaking must involve at least the temporary closing of large areas to the public is inevitable, together with the consequent heartburnings, and doubtless representations upon this head will shortly be made to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales.

One would naturally regret any step calculated to alter the aspect or character of the Moor in the slightest degree. Our English countryside is no longer so rich in natural amenities that we can afford to lose one feature of so unique a landscape as that of Dartmoor. On the other hand, from the Nature-lover's point of view, afforestation schemes have

one decided advantage, since, if successful, they would at least provide a sorely needed sanctuary for bird-life. This would be of even greater value should Dartmoor become a National Park at any future date. Upon this possibility many people, anxious to preserve the wild beauty of the Moor from the constant attacks of both the vandal and the economist, now stake their hopes. One cannot but think, however, that Dartmoor in the long run will prove her own surest guardian, and that her inaccessibility, the sterility of her soil, and the rigour of her climate will eventually triumph, as ever, over all attempts to change her character. She can serve no better purpose than that which she serves already. To the public the great wild hills are as free as air. Economically, they can be put to no better use than that of rough pasturage, and there is no valid reason why the natural beauties of the district should not be preserved to the full under existing conditions. That the present state of affairs is not altogether satisfactory in every respect is true enough, and there are many points upon which a clear exposition is eminently necessary. The need for definite regulations, to check abuses and the undue monopoly of public rights by individuals, is both urgent and obvious. This purpose could best be served, perhaps, by the re-imposition—with possible revision to suit altered conditions—of certain old Forest rules, with which I purpose to deal more fully in succeeding chapters. One might go so far as to suggest that responsible and public-spirited inhabitants of the parishes concerned should co-operate with the Duchy of Corn-

wall to encompass this end. Upon the whole, however, the existing conditions leave little to be desired, and one can but endorse a resolution recently passed by one of our local Parish Councils to the effect that "us bides as us waas".

The amenities of the Moor as a bird sanctuary have been freely discussed, and, if consent could be obtained from the necessary quarters, the idea has a great deal to recommend it. It would settle many vexed questions, and, while much would be gained, nobody would lose. The rights of common and turbary, as recognized by law, would not be affected in the least by such an arrangement, while the cause of wild-bird preservation, so badly in need of practical support, would gain immeasurably. Dartmoor, for the most part, is not ideal for such a purpose, owing to its altitude and barrenness, but it embraces a great variety of conditions; it already harbours several of our rarer *aves*, and possesses the incalculable advantage of extensive space—an essential factor which the majority of bird sanctuaries conspicuously lack.

Personally, I would like to see this course adopted upon all common lands throughout the country. The one difficulty appears to lie in the question of sporting rights—when such exist—but these, it should be pointed out, are of very little value, as a rule, to the general community. Where everyone shoots the shooting is almost invariably worthless as an inevitable consequence, and in any case, when the inhabitants of a village have sporting rights by prescription over certain lands, the sole benefit as a rule devolves upon two or three loafers who secure

## 14 DARTMOOR IN ALL ITS MOODS

everything of value while other people are at work. To the parish as a whole the privilege is therefore negligible. In such cases, again, the majority of the inhabitants—also holders of common rights—would welcome the conversion of such lands into sanctuaries, and, whether attended by conspicuous success or otherwise, an advance would at least have been made in the right direction.

## CHAPTER II

### CUSTOMS AND PEOPLE

It is not my purpose to enter upon the subject of the industries and activities of ancient Dartmoor. Boundless information is already at the disposal of anyone who desires enlightenment upon such matters, while the connoisseur may still find sufficient indications of the old methods and conditions to enable him to form his own impressions.

Although the days of tin-streaming and mining have passed, however, Dartmoor is not now entirely given up to pasturage or to the sightseer. Various minor industries are still pursued, of which, perhaps, the cutting of peat and "vags" is the most general. Though not quite as common a practice as was once the case, the small-holders, or occupiers of the original intakes which surround the Moor, still cut the greater part of their winter fuel upon the hills. For this purpose the "lifting" of "vags", or surface turf, is the more popular process. It involves less labour than delving for the genuine peat, and can be obtained, moreover, within easier reach of civilization. This practice, however, possesses one disadvantage, the increasing population of the villages sometimes resulting in the removal of greater quantities of turf than is desirable in the interests



of pasturage, deeper cutting being in this respect more economical.

The generally accepted rights of "turbary" entitle all venville tenants to take gravel, stone and fuel—"coal" is the old expression—for their own use. This, however, did not originally carry the right to sell, unless to another "within venville", and Rowe records various cases of actions brought against persons for abusing this privilege, one given instance being as far back as 1468. Violation of such rights would scarcely be possible nowadays, however, the cost of labour and transport to outlying parishes rendering the price of the fuel prohibitive. Transport, indeed, constitutes one of the chief difficulties that confront the peat-cutter, many of the most prolific "ties" being practically inaccessible to anything on wheels. At a comparatively recent date, pannier-donkeys were commonly employed for this purpose, but have now been superseded by carts, despite their obvious disadvantages. These find their way to and from the hills by means of tracks, which anyone but a Dartmoor small-holder would certainly condemn as impassable. Mere watercourse at the best of times, they become so washed out during bad weather that it is a matter for wonder that wheels, horse-flesh, or the nerves of the driver can stand the strain. Man, beast, load or vehicle rarely come to grief, however, having a happy knack of arriving more or less intact at the journey's end.

In almost every village stone-cutting is still a minor industry, the ring of iron upon the mountain granite making rough moorland music upon the near

hillsides, where the primitive rock is split into slabs to facilitate its conveyance to the work-shops, for shaping into gate-posts, grave-stones, or farm and garden rollers. It is scarcely necessary to remark that many of Dartmoor's historic monuments have been removed for this purpose. The old stone circles have suffered most, their convenient shape and erect position constituting a temptation that even nowadays frequently proves too strong for the practical-minded Devonian, in whose opinion a few hours of labour saved is worth many monuments. It is a somewhat strange reflection that these ancient stones, originally erected to further the performance of some savage rite, or to mark the resting-place of a long-forgotten sage or hero, should come at last, through an act of predatory vandalism, to stand as honoured head-stones in Christian burial-grounds. Such are the vicissitudes of Time.

Most picturesque and most popular of Dartmoor's industries is the whortleberry harvest, the in-gathering of which takes place between that of hay and corn, when the solitary places of the Moor, whose silence remains unbroken for the greater part of the year, echo to the sounds of human activity. Until quite recently, the whortleberry crop was regarded by the villagers as an important source of income. The few weeks during which the purple crop ripened to perfection were devoted almost exclusively to its harvesting, and the moorlands could show few prettier sights than the long files of quaintly dressed women and children returning from the more accessible slopes at sunset with their laden baskets. For hundreds of years this whortle-

berry-picking has been carried on by Dartmoor villagers, but those who study present indications prophesy that another generation will see its end, and the wild fruit will be left undisturbed for the ring-ouzels and the grouse. The modern child no longer takes kindly to the work. It is too tedious. Counter attractions are too numerous, and although the village schools are still closed "when the whorts come" in accordance with immemorial custom, the ranks of the actual pickers are no longer materially swelled by the youthful element. Young men and girls for the most part adopt the same attitude, the work nowadays being mainly carried on by the older folk, who were reared to it from the cradle.

The modern standard of values is largely responsible, no doubt, for the decline of the industry. Formerly whortleberry-pickers were content to sell their fruit to the local dealer at the rate of 2*d.* per quart. This sounds little enough, yet represented a fair wage when judged by the standard of the period, since a skilled picker could gather anything from twenty to thirty quarts in the course of a day, thus earning nearly double the amount paid to a farm labourer. With the post-war boom, the price of whortleberries soared to the artificial and fanciful figure of 2*s.* 6*d.* per quart, and for the time being the work became highly remunerative, the inevitable decline to 10*d.*—the latest price paid at the height of the season—naturally seeming inadequate by comparison, although 500 per cent in excess of the pre-war figure. Against this, however, it must be remembered that whortleberry-



SUNDOWN ON THE HILL TOPS  
*From a water colour painting by Lord Gaiell*



picking is a more difficult task than in former years. The once abundant growth of the plant is now so reduced by frequent burning that the old facilities no longer exist, and a dozen quarts under existing conditions would represent a good day's work. In a word, the money earned to-day proves insufficient to tempt the younger men or the small-holders who form so large a part of the population in all Dartmoor villages. This section of the community, it should be remarked, are still enjoying a period of at least moderate prosperity, being unaffected by the difficulties that confront agriculturists upon a more extensive scale. Responsible for no rent and independent of labour, since they work upon a more or less communal system, helping one another at any "two-folks job", they are self-supporting up to a certain point; but, even so, their prosperity in the face of incontestable facts and figures remains a frequent source of wonder.

Although so many of the ancient customs have lapsed with changing conditions, and the moorland folk are no longer required to attend at Cattle-drifts and Stannary Parliaments, the old days are still recalled by one or two quaint survivals, of which perhaps the Beating of the Bounds affords the most characteristic example. This ceremony is still observed by many parishes, the perambulation taking place septennially. A Bank Holiday is usually selected for the occasion, which is regarded very seriously by the older parishioners. Since the proceeding is accompanied by the demonstration of real or imaginary rights which as often as not

takes the form of purposeless destruction, particularly after the midday meal, it is considered a somewhat mixed blessing. There is, none the less, an old-world atmosphere about it which possesses a distinct charm. Starting from the village green, or some similar meeting-place, the procession embarks upon a systematic tour of the parish boundaries, attended by representatives of the Duchy of Cornwall and all adjoining parishes, and every stone or landmark which, in the opinion of some village oracle, might benefit the parish if standing elsewhere, is promptly removed. Free fights no longer mark these proceedings, but acrimonious discussions are not unusual, while certain queer formalities, such as standing the youngest boy of the company upon his head at prescribed spots—an act performed with the utmost gravity by the oldest man—form part and parcel of the perambulation. An open-air lunch of bread and cheese and cider, provided by the parish for all comers alike, and usually taken at the most remote point upon the Moor, where it has been conveyed in a farm cart, is not the least important item, and a general air of freemasonry and good-fellowship pervades the entire proceeding.

A great deal has been written about the moorland people, their idiosyncrasies and alleged peculiarities of disposition and character. The hot-blooded temperament of the moorman is sometimes attributed to the "Latin strain", the presence of which is accounted for by the former settlement upon a considerable scale of French prisoners, released from Princetown after the Napoleonic and other wars,

and absorbed to a large extent in the local population.

This theory, like most others, is not without a foundation of truth. It is somewhat weakened, however, by the fact that most of the French names, together with their original owners, have long since returned to the farther side of the Channel. The moorland people for the most part possess names eminently Devonian and pre-eminently British, many of them reminiscent of Kingsley, Blackmore and Whyte Melville. One is frequently impressed, moreover, by the number of historic and aristocratic surnames now more or less general among the Mid-Devon villagers. Here, combining literary and historic interest, we have Yeo, Drake, Tremlett Chastey, Aysh (Ayss 1388), Burgoyne, Carthew, Battishill (Batoshelle 1296), Luxmore (Lukesmore 1296), Mudge, Weekes (Wyke), and Crocker, some, if not all of whom claim the distinction of being "at home when the Conqueror called". It would be interesting to trace these names from their present holders to the ancient stock from which they undoubtedly sprang.

John Ridd has no counterpart upon Dartmoor, the typical Devonian being somewhat below middle height, dark, and sturdily built. His dialect is distinctive, but as a rule the attempts on the part of various novelists to reproduce it upon paper are not convincing, for the cogent reason that only a native can undertake even vocal mimicry with success. Anyone unaccustomed to "speaking the language" experiences considerable difficulty in doing so, even though sufficiently familiar with it to follow



the voluble reminiscences of some village greybeard. The pit-falls are numerous, and the misapplication of a single preposition is enough to destroy the effect, with the result that the entire speech rings falsely in ears accustomed to the genuine brogue. There is more in it, again, than the mere catching of certain stock words and phrases, and for the most part the true vernacular consists of a peculiar softness of intonation and turn of phrase, rather than in the actual words used, sufficiently curious as many are.

The genuine Devonian dialect is indeed a language unknown to script. It is entirely without the harsh quality of the northern speech, the Midland twang, the rich guttural burr of Somerset and Dorset. It by no means lacks in picturesque phraseology, although here again the tendency to romanticism has inevitably crept in, adorning the conversation of the country-people with the poetical turn of expression and simile more usually ascribed to the Red Indian. The Devonian of the present day no longer regards the Moor in the light of an actual personality—a power to be dreaded or propitiated, according to its fickle mood. He merely looks upon it as a place where he cuts turf, poaches, or pastures cattle, and, incidentally, gets wet or fog-bound if he neglects to study the weather signs. He does not refer to the rivers as one speaks of a fellow being of the feminine gender, and, far from cherishing and eagerly imparting traditionary notions as to the Dart's savage lust for human life, nobody would be more astonished—and incredulous—than the man who runs sheep upon her banks,

if informed of his familiar river's bloodthirsty tendencies. The Yorkshire miner, or the factory hand from Manchester, when he emerges from the train on Snowdon's summit, evinces more enthusiasm over his bag of buns than at the magnificence of the panorama, and at risk of being cynical, I would suggest that his attitude is characteristic of his type the world over. "They gaze upon green savannahs and away to the summits of mighty mountain-tops, without experiencing one thought of the sublime," wrote Mayne Reid of the Mexicans, and without the aid of sentimentalism, I do not think that the British rustic, whether in the West Country or elsewhere, can claim a more pronounced share of the æsthetic sense. A local farm-boy's definition of the coming spring as "next dung-hauling" may provide a somewhat exaggerated example, but it serves to show how curiously slight a part poetry plays in the rural mentality.

"It looks pretty when it's in flower," our village carpenter admitted, when I protested against the firing of a gorse-clad slope, which the day before had been one blaze of golden bloom, "but think of the varmints (vermin) it harbours, and see how much tidier it looks now!" Tidiness in this case was represented by a blackened desolation, and supplied a sufficiently horrible example of the countryman's idea of the beautiful.

If the poetical spirit of the rustic never existed in its alleged form, however, that of superstition has not yet died—at least in the older generation. There is still many an old hill-shepherd whom no consideration would induce to "tail" his lambs

when the moon is waning, since he firmly believes that in such a case the mutilated members would not cease to bleed until the moon "turned". A similar though curiously opposite notion prevails in the case of a puppy's tail, which is supposed to grow with the moon, thus defeating the purpose of amputation. A pig must not be killed during the latter quarters of the lunar month, as the bacon would certainly shrink in consequence, and so deeply rooted are these beliefs even to-day, that a young housemaid in our employ assures my wife that, when a child, her father always insisted upon cropping her hair every new moon, to ensure an abundant growth.

Faith in pixies, the Wish Hounds, the Hairy Hand, the Black Dog, together with their mischievous influence upon human affairs, has long since declined. Some readers, however, may be interested to know that the "white witch" described now and again by West-Country novelists, is not by any means the product of an author's fertile imagination. Far from being a picturesque myth, he or she—for the power is vested in either sex—still practises the mysterious art in many moorland villages, and belief in the ability of such people to help or harm is more general than is commonly supposed.

A sporting farmer in this neighbourhood recently suffered from a number of conspicuous warts on his hands. When hunting one day in an adjoining parish, he complained of these to a village patriarch with whom he happened to be conversing. Immediately interested, the old man asked leave to inspect

the disfigurements, and, having done so, much to the farmer's surprise remarked casually : " I'll give 'ee a ha'penny for them, boy." The owner replying to the effect that the unwelcome excrescences were marketable at any price, the curious deal was concluded, the warts disappearing within a day or two. The transaction was related to me, word for word, by the man concerned, who, far from being an ideal subject for " faith-healing ", ridiculed the entire proceeding, even while admitting the almost miraculous cure.

One might quote various instances, curiously baffling in these eminently practical days, that undeniably suggest the exercise of the dark craft. As most of the persons concerned still live, however, more detailed descriptions are impossible for obvious reasons. I well remember one woman of whom an entire village stood in awe—a circumstance which a rabbit-trapper who lodged in her cottage turned to lucrative account. He commissioned his landlady to sell rabbits for him among the neighbours at a special and exorbitant rate, and such was the fear in which she was held, that few declined either to purchase her wares or to pay her price. I, personally, can vouch for an uncanny trick which this woman possessed, which, whether purely acrobatic or otherwise, was exceedingly disconcerting. When walking behind her one afternoon, I was astonished to find her full face confronting me, although to all appearance she was walking straight ahead without turning a muscle of her body. One was reminded of the manner in which an owl pivots its head to face any desired direction.

In a neighbouring parish a year or two ago, there died a man, formerly a gamekeeper, a farmer later in life, who for some years practised the peculiar art of "blood-stopping", as it is called in the district. A cow owned by a young farmer, well known to me, was "horned" by another, and bled profusely. The veterinary surgeon was sent for and all prescribed remedies applied, but without avail. A message was then dispatched to the "white witch", who, without visiting the animal, exercised his power, merely repeating in private a charm consisting of a form of words, upon which the bleeding immediately ceased—this being only one of many similar instances.

This particular charm, together with its beneficent quality, is said to be transferable, but is only efficacious if handed on to one of the opposite sex. It was given by the "white witch", just before his death last year, to the mother of the young farmer in question. She, in her turn, transferred it to her son, who, as a special favour, passed it on to my wife, the charm being thus in our possession at the moment. Having received it in strict confidence, however, one is not at liberty to publish it.

In the practical affairs of everyday life, the West Countryman is strangely inconsistent. Though frequently accused of close-fistedness, he is in truth open-handed rather than otherwise, and one comes across many men who are liberal almost to a fault. The old-fashioned village blacksmith or carpenter, though frequently impecunious, is as careless over money as though it were no object, and may allow his bills to become out of date for sheer lack of atten-

tion. He is quite as careless when he in turn is debtor—an inconvenient habit at times. On the other hand, in the driving of a bargain he is as canny as a Scotchman, in which connection he appears to be the worthy descendant of the original squatters described by Chapple, who, under certain conditions, were entitled to a “newtake of eight moor acres in the skirts of the forest, exclusive of rocks, bogs and mires intermixed therewith”. The temptation to stretch this inch of land into the proverbial ell usually proved irresistible, and we are told that “fifty, sixty, or even eighty or more acres have been sometimes taken in the name of rocky or miry ground, intermixed with the eight acres of pasture ground thus granted”. Needless to add, it became necessary to withdraw this privilege, and no newtakes have been allowed upon similar terms since 1776.

That many enclosures have since been made goes without saying, and in this connection some years ago there occurred an incident which has become famous in Dartmoor history. Certain inhabitants of South Zeal, having taken it into their heads to enclose various sections of common land along the Blackaton Valley, proceeded to do so. A considerable amount of land had been taken in, when the Duchy of Cornwall, deciding to act in the matter, dispatched men to wreck the enclosures and demolish the walls that had been built. Before the work of demolition had made much headway, however, the would-be squatters, doubtless reinforced by contingents of friends and relatives, arrived upon the scene in strength, armed with every sort of crude weapon the village

could produce, and as the result of a violent altercation, the representatives of law and authority were obliged to retire from the field, the scene of the encounter bearing the name of Balaclava to this day. Though losing the war, however, the Duchy contrived to win the peace. The appropriators of the soil, realizing the insecurity of their legal position, agreed to pay at least a nominal price for the land they had enclosed, thus indirectly consolidating the position of the Duchy and rendering the annexation of further intakes no easy matter. A somewhat ironical point that did not, I think, arise during the transaction, lay in the fact that at least a part of the contested land belonged to Throwleigh Parish, the position of South Tawton commoners in the matter being therefore delicate at best.

The Devonian is notoriously tenacious of his "Moor rights", even if they happen to be of no value to him as an individual. There are men who insist upon setting the heather ablaze although they stand to derive no benefit whatsoever from the act. The assertion of the supposed right is all that matters—an attitude that can best be illustrated, perhaps, by including an extract from the account of an action brought against a man for unlawful burning of heather a few years ago.

Defendant said he claimed as a right such as he had been accustomed to for many years as an X—— parishioner, to cut "vags" and turf on the Moor, and it was necessary to burn the heather before the "vags" could be cut.

In cross-examination, he admitted that he had not cut any "vags" at any of the places where he had lit the fires.

The latter admission somewhat weakened the defence,

as may readily be supposed, particularly as the ground selected was declared unsuitable for turf-cutting, and judgment was given, not unnaturally, against the defendant.

Apart from this outstanding characteristic, which is the outcome of ideas fostered from childhood, in all essential respects the Dartmoor villager differs little from others of his type. A man of strong prejudices, his likes and dislikes take a pronounced form, and though kindly disposed as a rule towards the stranger, his contempt for the upstart is deep-rooted and unconquerable. He is quick to resent any assumption of superiority upon the part of one of his own class, but his sense of "caste" is proof against class antagonism or democratic propaganda. His standard in this respect is decided, although his manner of defining it might well disconcert anyone unaccustomed to the Devonian and his ways. The most two-edged, but at the same time sincere, compliment that I ever received was paid to me by a sporting rustic, who, when expressing approval of a mutual acquaintance, remarked, "He've got no more pride than you have." Needless to add, the word "pride" in local parlance denotes that undesirable quality usually described by the vulgar term "side".

He is sometimes accused of shiftiness and unreliability, but if he lacks the downright qualities of the Yorkshireman, the Devonian in his own quiet way is sturdy, independent and loyal. Such a character was my good old moorman friend, the late John Bennett, a well-known Dartmoor guide and former employee of the South Devon Hunt, to whom



I am indebted for many tales and much information concerning the old life and the old conditions, of which men of his order formed so essential a part. Few have possessed a wider knowledge of the Moor, or its history past and present. Professedly a stonemason, he felt the call of the heather at an early age, varying his official occupation and occasional work upon the ranges with the equally lucrative pastime—in those days—of tramping the hills in search of black game and plover. A deep-rooted love of the Moor was the ruling passion of his life, and no man could display a more accurate and intimate acquaintance with the wild creatures and their ways. Like Widecombe's famous Tom French, he knew "the line of every prowling fox", together with every breeding-place in the rocks or heather, and one might almost say that there was scarcely a fox-kennel or a hare's form upon the hills with the whereabouts of which he was not acquainted. Many times when hounds have been trying some great marsh, he has indicated to me the precise spot from which the fox would jump long before there was the slightest indication of a find. Indeed, one could gather more useful information in the course of an hour's talk with him than from half the Nature-books in circulation, and many of his experiences, related to me in the course of long days on the moors, are recorded in the succeeding chapters.

I first made his acquaintance in the hunting-field, upon which occasion he appeared as if by magic beside a clitter into which the South Devon hounds had just driven a fox, timing his arrival with almost uncanny skill, although he had been nowhere visible

during the run. His interest in wild life was not exclusively sporting, however. He had an eye for everything that lived or grew upon the hills. Once, when walking with him along a moorland track, I noticed that his attention was riveted upon a wayside bank, and, upon inquiring the cause, was informed that he had "sowed some flower-seeds (poppies and lupins, it transpired) handy here a year or two back", and he was anxious to note the result of the experiment.

To me he was invaluable, not only in the character of a human encyclopedia upon moorland matters, but also as a keen and discriminating observer. From his cottage overlooking the Taw Valley there runs a high wild ridge commanding a wide view over the surrounding country, and posted upon this vantage-point, little escaped the comprehensive sweep of his binoculars.

When he came to my house, as he frequently did, he observed sundry curious little formalities of his own. For some unaccountable reason, his sense of the proprieties forbade him to sit in an upholstered chair, and he would solve the difficulty by bringing in with him a polished oak chair from the hall, upon which he could bestow himself without violating his standard of decorum. Once seated, he had always something interesting to report—some incident that he had witnessed, or rare bird that he had seen. For birds he sometimes had names unknown to ornithology, a goldcrest being to him a "golden carenna" (I have no idea of the correct spelling), a blue tit an "ackymal", and when it came to describing a rarity, he could sometimes supply no name

at all, though sure enough of his bird. Upon such occasions, I selected illustrations of likely species from Thorburn's works, and submitted the plates for his inspection, listening with considerable interest for the terse "No, sir", or the equally emphatic "That's 'e", which announced that the riddle had been solved. His decisions were always final, and, when ratified, correct.

He had also his own way of acknowledging the slight services that we were able to render him from time to time, and this took the form of small offerings of plants from his garden, and now and again a selection of choice birds, such as snipe, woodcock or golden plover, into whose acquisition we thought it advisable not to enquire too closely. It was nothing unusual to hear his footstep outside the door at grey dawn, and upon coming down later, his offering would be found, carefully placed upon the step.

He was a student of books as well as of Nature, and read more widely than one would have imagined. I once described him in print, little dreaming that the passage would ever meet his eye. He saw it, however, but, fortunately, declared himself "very well plazed wi' it", requested a copy of the magazine—"book", he called it—and proffered further information for future occasions.

In ordinary conversation he was a man of few words, quiet-mannered, eminently dignified, and during the many years that I knew him I never heard him give expression to an oath or even an unbecoming sentiment. He lies buried in the picturesque old Quaker graveyard at Sticklepath, within sound of the river from his beloved hills. Those who knew

him best, however, cannot help thinking that he might more appropriately have been laid to rest in some quiet spot among the hills themselves, a granite slab to record his name, with the sun, the wind, the heather scent and the plover's call to bear him company.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DARTMOOR COMMONS

FOR all general purposes the Commons of Dartmoor, which existed as such prior to the Norman Conquest, are "part and parcel" of the great central waste known as the Forest. They are so far distinct, however, in that they lie within the boundaries of the various parishes to which they are attached, and to which, within certain limits, they are considered to belong.

It would almost seem that the West Countryman regards a common merely as a tract of land upon which he may do as he pleases, without the inconvenience of paying rent or being in any way responsible for upkeep. Being human, he adopts a somewhat one-sided attitude, claiming all privileges without admitting the restrictions upon which they are conditional, from which circumstance has arisen the not altogether unreasonable complaint that the Dartmoor Commons are overstocked, over-swaled, and by various means rendered destitute of wild life and much of their natural beauty.

The case of the moorland sheep and cattle requires careful investigation. A lowland farmer who allowed his beasts to perish from starvation or neglect would not escape the eye of authority, yet hundreds of animals die miserably upon Dartmoor, their fate

scarcely arousing comment, let alone censure. As usual, in such cases the fault is due to the prevailing system rather than to the wilful cruelty of individuals. More often than not the sheep-owner can scarcely help himself. He owns or rents perhaps no more than the smallest holding, but pastures a large flock upon the Moor, the animals contriving to pick up a precarious livelihood under normal conditions. Adverse circumstances in the shape of severe weather or a backward season may conceivably upset calculations, however. The mountain pasturage proves entirely inadequate to support the sheep, and their owner has no land to which he can remove them. Outside "keep", if at all procurable, is scarce and expensive, and the least-ruinous course from the owner's point of view is to allow the animals to take their chance upon the hills, where their maintenance at least is costing him nothing. A certain number at any rate will survive, and the inevitable loss is faced philosophically as a rule, being part and parcel of the venture. From a humane standpoint, however, this course leaves much to be desired, and to obviate this evil, there existed formerly a very old and very fair rule. Under the Laws of Levancy and Couchancy, commoners were forbidden "to turne or put into the said fforest or common at anie tyme or times anie more or other beastes and cattell than they can or maye usuallie winter in and upon their tenements and growndes lyinge within Venvill". It would be well if this rule, now lapsed, were revived and strictly enforced.

It is somewhat curious that sheep should now overrun the wilds of Dartmoor, in many cases to the

exclusion of other beasts, although originally they were not "commonable" animals. They were first mentioned as such in an official survey held at Okehampton in 1609. Prior to that date, they were excluded, together with hogs, goats and geese, from free pasturage upon the waste lands of Devonshire, but, unlike these other animals, could be agisted at the rate of 3*d.* per score by venville men, and 7½*d.* per score by others holding lands within the county. Incidentally, this same veto upon sheep applied to ancient Commons in other parts of the country, for the reason that "being such close grazers", they were supposed to pick out the finest grasses, to the detriment of other animals such as deer and cattle. This, doubtless, constituted the official objection to their presence upon Dartmoor, even as elsewhere.

From a picturesque point of view as well as for old association's sake, it is a matter for regret that the historic ponies, once so characteristic of the Moor, are fast disappearing from the hills, the substitution of electric power for that of animal labour in so many of our mines having to a large extent destroyed the demand for these sturdy little beasts. A certain number may still be seen, but their ultimate passing may almost certainly be expected at no distant date. One is somewhat consoled for the loss of so attractive a feature by the reflection that the majority of ponies reared upon the Moor to-day are destined for the food, and not for the service, of mankind, a great number being exported to Belgium for human consumption. The price of a full-grown Dartmoor pony is now little more than a matter of shillings, there being little wonder in consequence

that the trade is now enumerated in the long list of depressed industries.

Cattle are still run, of course, the black hornless variety with a considerable proportion of cross-bred beasts being most in vogue at the present time. These have been found to stand the climate better than the genuine Devon breeds. Long-horned Scotch cattle are also seen occasionally, but these are not always satisfactory, since, for some unaccountable reason, they lack the "Moor sense", and are easily entrapped in bogs or "stables". As a rule, however, bullocks have largely been superseded by Scotch sheep, which upon the whole have proved the most profitable proposition within recent years. Yet again, curiously enough, the Scotch sheep is not, strictly speaking, a commonable animal. Legally, every occupier of land adjoining the Moor is responsible for the upkeep of all intervening fences, and can lodge no claim against the owners of cattle that break through and trespass upon this land on account of insufficient barriers. It has been maintained, however, that Scotch sheep, being a breed that has been introduced into the country and is unsuitable on account of its climbing and roving propensities, may be treated as exceptions to this rule, and damages for trespass by these animals might be considered recoverable.

The rate of mortality among mountain sheep is high—far higher than the owners care to admit, for not only does the question of overstocking then arise, but there is also the express obligation to bury the carcase, which is a duty that is almost invariably evaded, except in public spots, or in cases where the



ownership can be established beyond question. For the most part, however, they are left unburied upon the open moorlands, and as many as fifty gruesome corpses have been counted in the course of a morning's walk. I once came across seven within a hundred yards or so, all lying in exposed places upon the heather, without even the excuse of boggy surroundings which at times, admittedly, makes the task of approaching them for purposes of burial no easy matter. As an example of the laxity which exists in this respect, I might mention that during the recent winter a dead sheep lay for some months close beside a wheel-path, practically within view of the village policeman's windows. In this case there could have been little doubt upon the question of ownership, the establishing of which appears to constitute the principal difficulty. Readiness in claiming carcasses is only displayed upon occasions when sheep have been worried by dogs or foxes and there is a reasonable possibility of obtaining damages.

Indeed, one might go so far as to say that there is scarcely a regulation restricting the activities of the commoners that has not become a dead letter. Most notable, perhaps, is the vexed problem of the heather and its periodical burning. The general public may well tire of this subject which of necessity has come very much to the fore, but it is one which every man who values such things as natural beauty, historic conditions, and, last but not least, the claims of wild life, cannot but feel very strongly. Indeed, writers upon this point are compelled to adopt the attitude of a certain famous preacher, who, bent upon rectifying some glaring social evil, delivered

the same sermon week after week, to the no small annoyance of his congregation. When waited upon at last by a deputation demanding a change of subject, he declared his intention of preaching that sermon and no other until he saw tangible evidence of its bearing fruit.

A warm spring is very delightful, but upon Dartmoor it has one decided drawback, since it presents too free a field to that prince of vandals, the person who cannot resist setting fire to anything that will burn. During spring and early summer one may travel for miles across once glorious hills and moors, and see little more than a blackened wilderness that senseless burning has not only disfigured but rendered sterile and worthless for an indefinite period. Anyone inquiring into the purpose of these indiscriminate fires will be informed by the villagers that it is only "swaling", or burning the heather to provide pasturage. Fresh grass, one is assured, springs up in the track of the blaze. This seems at first to be plausible enough, and were the burning of the moorlands confined to judicious swaling, done properly and when necessary by responsible people, as upon the northern grouse-moors, no reasonable objection could be raised. Nothing, however, could be farther removed from the state of affairs upon Dartmoor. The passion to kindle fires becomes literally a fever amongst a certain section of the country-people at this time of year, and every bush or patch of heather that will "run", as the expression goes, is set alight, utterly irrespective of its worthlessness or value as pasturage. Early last summer, when walking over a high ridge in the Okehampton dis-

trict, I was pleased to see a promising crop of young herbage springing up in the track of a fire which had stripped the hillside almost to bedrock some four years before. The growth contained as much grass as heather, providing excellent rough pasturage. I was astonished, therefore, when re-crossing the hill a week or two later to find heather and grass once more burned to the very roots, and the ground again reduced to an arid waste useless to man or beast. Again, on Whit-Monday, 1929, I counted no fewer than thirty-five fires blazing on and around Cosdon Beacon, where the inhabitants of South Tawton were "beating the bounds". The fires were lit in this instance, I was told, despite the protests of more responsible-minded parishioners.

Doubtless there are country-people capable of appreciating rural beauty.

Plowmen, Shepherds, have I found, and more than once, and still could find

Sons of God, and kings of men in utter nobleness of mind.

It is also true that there exists another type of person, who, in the words of an exasperated writer, "is not content as long as the countryside retains a single beautiful feature". Mr. Bernard Shaw, writing upon the subject of war crimes some years ago, said something to the effect that while every army contains many fine men, it also contains its inevitable percentage of "infernal scoundrels", and upon the same principle, while every village community is mainly composed of decent people, there is always the irresponsible minority, and it is with these troublesome minorities that one has mainly to contend nowadays. The wholesale conflagrations,

deplored by every sane person, are usually the work of a few village youths, for whom such considerations as natural beauties do not exist. They set fire to gorse-brakes, wayside bushes, and anything and everything to which they dare put a match, merely for the boyish love of a blaze, and the moment they are free to do so, they rush off to the hills to pursue this primitive pastime. Without exaggeration, many thousands of acres of beautiful young heather—cover for birds and places of unalloyed pleasure to all who can appreciate wild charm—are destroyed for no better purpose than to provide an hour or so of excitement to a few village lads and children who naturally cannot be expected to know any better. So reckless are these amateur “swalers”, that fires are lighted utterly regardless of the consequences. That they sometimes extend to adjoining woodlands and private property has been proved by recent instances. In the Tavistock district a year or two ago sheep were caught and burned between conflicting fires, while it is nothing unusual during the nesting season to find brooding birds literally roasted upon their eggs.

The evil is as old as the hills themselves, though, like all other abuses of the kind, it increases every year with the growing population, and the crying need for action becomes more palpable. It existed in a minor degree as long ago as the time of Gilbert White, who, speaking of similar instances in his own neighbourhood, puts the case with customary aptness.

Though (by Statute 4 and 5, W. and Mary, c. 23) “to burn on any waste, between Candlemas and Midsummer, any grig,

ling, heath and furze, goss or fern, is punishable with whipping and confinement in the house of correction ", yet in this forest, about March and April, according to the dryness of the season, such vast heath fires are lighted up, that they often get to a masterless head, and, catching the hedges, have sometimes been communicated to the underwoods and coppices, where great damage has ensued. The plea for these burnings is that when the old coat of heath, etc., is consumed, young will sprout up, and afford much tender browse for cattle ; but where there is large old furze, the fire, following the roots, consumes the very ground ; so that for hundreds of acres nothing is to be seen but smother and desolation, the whole circuit round looking like the cinders of a volcano ; and, the soil being quite exhausted, no traces of vegetation are to be found for years.

The famous naturalist might well have been describing present conditions on Dartmoor upon a minor scale. To-day I could indicate areas that are still barren on account of fires lighted during the great drought of 1921. In this respect, too, the old-fashioned Moor farmer of a certain type is as purblind as his New Forest representative of Gilbert White's days, and cannot be brought to see that fire, far from being of necessity his best friend, when misapplied more often than not proves his worst enemy. It is yet another case of " a little knowledge ", also of a sound principle carried to a deplorable extreme.

The primitive Dartmoor villager, again, is possessed of the idea that the privilege of burning whatever he pleases is one of his jealously guarded " rights ", and burn he *will*, whatever, wherever, and whenever he can, even though he owns no sheep or cattle, and stands to derive no benefit from the destruction he effects. For this reason he encourages rather than represses the youth of the parish in its irresponsible orgies, with such disastrous results that lovers of

Dartmoor have been heard to remark that the country is now scarcely worth visiting, so sadly is it defaced.

Is there no remedy? a resident of Widecombe inquired in a letter to *The Times* a year or so ago. Why not? Scotland has found means of curbing the transports of her "fire brigade", even as Ireland has taken measures to preserve her disappearing game-birds, and Canada to save her magnificent fauna from extermination. Is it only in Devonshire that the vandal can be a law unto himself? These are questions that may well be asked, and it seems only reasonable to assume that with the evil so palpable, means of redress must be available. Upon the actual Forest of Dartmoor the matter largely rests with the Duchy of Cornwall, and up to a certain point the fires are held in check, systematic swaling being undertaken by competent persons. None the less, a great many are lighted surreptitiously, and it is nothing unusual to see large areas ablaze, in the kindling of which the Duchy employees have had no part. One Sunday afternoon in May, 1929, I was unable to reach Cranmere Pool on account of a huge conflagration which swept hundreds of acres like a prairie fire, destroying peat and heather in its track. This is only one of numberless instances that might be named. Upon the Forest as a rule the offender merely sets the heather alight and beats a hasty retreat, leaving the blaze to extend or die out as chance wills. Upon the Commons, on the other hand, there is no pretence of secrecy, and here the case presents countless difficulties, not the least of which is the attitude of the villagers in

general towards any attempt to restrict—as they consider—their so-called liberties. A year or two ago the Devon County Council placed notices upon many of the Dartmoor Commons forbidding the lighting of fires by “unauthorized persons”, and the police were instructed to take action in all cases that seemed to come under this heading. The success of the measure was distinctly limited, however, and upon this side of the Moor at any rate, negligible, mainly for lack of local support. Two village youths of Belstone parish were caught red-handed, and would have been prosecuted in the ordinary course of events. This proceeding, however, aroused a storm of protest. Mass meetings were called and demonstrations suggested, the outcome of it all being that the case was dropped, while the notice-boards for the most part were knocked down or destroyed, and no further steps were taken in the matter.

So little has been effected, indeed, that the present spring of 1931 has witnessed the worst fires for many years in some localities. They have been particularly rampant along the line of Commons stretching south from Cosdon Beacon to the Chagford hills and away to Grimspound and Hamel Down. The main stumbling in the way of suppression lies in the precise definition of the term “unauthorized”. Anyone remonstrated with immediately pleads rights as a commoner, whether he happens to be six years old or sixty. The inevitable question thus arises as to the qualifications that constitute a “Commoner”, mere residence in a parish seeming scarcely sufficient to justify the claim. In old local phraseology, he is defined as a “pot-boiler”, or house-

holder, but whether the assumed rights and privileges of such a person extend automatically to all members of his household is more than doubtful. I happened not long ago to overhear part of an argument between a local J.P. and a labourer whose sons had been caught lighting heather-fires. The labourer, according to custom, claimed rights conferred during the reign of King John, while the village magnate adhered firmly to his point, which was to the effect that, whatever the unstable monarch may have said or done in days gone by, it in no way entitled any cottager's boys "to go up on the Moor and do just what they'm minded". Personally, I was entirely of his way of thinking.

In any case, the right to effect purely wanton destruction should be hard to establish. That boys should derive amusement from the pastime is only natural, but, needless to add, the transports of youth cannot always be allowed unbridled swing. It has been suggested that each parish should appoint its own official swaler, in whom might be vested the sole authority to burn gorse or heather within that parish's boundaries, but whether in this case the remedy would prove worse than the complaint is an open question. It is quite conceivable that men employed for this purpose and no other would quickly eliminate every sprig of heather upon the Commons. This, from an agricultural point of view, might be considered desirable, until one remembers that there are other sides to the purely economic question. During severe weather, such as deep snow, or in times of drought, a certain amount of heather is almost essential upon mountainous country, both as shelter and



food for sheep, the young plant itself providing quite useful and edible pasturage which is usually accessible when grass is covered. This circumstance has not, I think, been taken sufficiently into account. Again it is argued, and with truth, that the elimination of heather from high moorlands is frequently succeeded by the appearance of dwarf gorse and bracken, the last state being, in consequence, decidedly worse than the first.

Finally, there arises the question of wild bird-life, and the destruction involved under the existing system. It is difficult to see how burning upon an extensive scale can be carried on during the nesting season without violating the express provisions of the Wild Birds Protection Acts, since to swale a wide tract of moorland without burning many nests with eggs or young is clearly impossible. However that may be, the case might easily be met by a law under which swaling should automatically cease upon a given date, say, April 1. This should meet every objection, and is only consistent with both the old Forest rules and the existing Wild Birds Protection Acts. Formerly swaling was forbidden under any circumstances upon Dartmoor Forest after the month of March, and this rule is still more or less recognized, although in general effect it exists merely to be disregarded. The stock objection that under its strict enforcement, burning might be entirely impossible for the current season should the early spring prove wet may be dismissed offhand. So excessive is the swaling under present conditions, that its total cessation for one year or even during a period of years, would be beneficial rather than otherwise to

the real interests of all concerned, involving no hardship whatsoever. By right, the moorlands should be apportioned, as was once the case, for systematic swaling, ten years being then the period prescribed by rule between each burning. The lapse of this system is largely responsible for the indiscriminate methods now employed.

Incidentally, there is a popular belief that the majority of fires are due to accidental causes, such as the careless dropping of a cigarette-end, or even the action of the sun through broken glass. The latter, though not, perhaps, actually impossible, is too improbable to require serious attention, while one may venture to assert with tolerable safety that no fire has ever yet been ignited upon a Dartmoor Common by means of a cigarette-end. I can only suggest that anyone inclined to doubt this statement should make the experiment with dry grass, heather, or even straw. He will be surprised at the result. That a match, carelessly dropped before it is extinguished, has now and again set a bush alight there can be no doubt, but in such a case the man who drops it is usually made aware of the circumstance, and stamps out the blaze—if so disposed—before much harm has been done. The moorlands would present a very different spectacle to-day were accidental fires in truth mainly responsible for their disfigurement.

A great deal has been said again about mischievous burning upon the part of trippers, to which one can only reply that the damage done by such persons in this respect is negligible. It should be pointed out that the great fires occur for the most part

early in the summer, long before the real "tripper season" has even begun. The excursionist may apply a match to a small gorse-bush or detached clump of ling, but he is too fearful of consequences to commit arson upon an extensive scale. It is somewhat curious to note that the Rev. Hugh Bretton, writing in 1914, pleads with the visitor not to "snatch the bread out of the mouths of these moormen" by setting alight to their pasture and the brakes which provide cover for their rabbits. Nowadays it is the visitor—not always the vandal depicted by Mr. Baring Gould—who pleads for protection against the wanton and suicidal activities of the Commoner, who destroys not only the beauty but the utility of the countryside. We live in a revolutionary age indeed.

•

## CHAPTER IV

### SPORTING RIGHTS AND GAME-BIRDS

THERE is no doubt that the game and mineral rights upon the Dartmoor Commons, together with the lordship of the soil, are vested in the Duchy of Cornwall, although it is equally certain that the Duchy derives but little benefit from the exceedingly limited number of game-birds that haunt both the Commons and the Forest. Upon the actual Forest, the shooting rights, though frequently infringed, are at least nominally reserved, although the Venville tenants claim certain privileges which the Duchy authorities upon their part are not prepared to admit.

For the benefit of readers not conversant with the old Forest terms, it might be as well to explain that certain parishes lying upon the outskirts of the Moor originally paid *fines villarum*, or dues of the town, now commonly known as Venville fees. These conferred upon the inhabitants of all such parishes special rights of pasturage and turbary, including the additional privilege to take from the Forest lands "all things that maye do them goode, savinge vert (whch. they take to be green oke) and venson". There was also included the right to "fish in all waters" and "exemption from tollage in all fairs and markets throughout England, except London,

Totnes and Barnstaple". In return for these concessions, they were regarded as the King's special tenants and were required to "do suit and service to his courts and there present all defaults in and about the Forest". They were also liable to be called upon to participate in the cattle-drifts, "driving the Moor for trespassers upon each quarter of the Forest, once yearly in each quarter, with an additional one in the eastern quarter for colts, after receiving notice through the Forest reeve, from the deputy auditor, who fixes the exact time which is somewhere between new and old Midsummer Day". These duties, needless to say, have now lapsed, together in most cases with the Venville rents, upon which account it seems only reasonable to assume that the Venville tenant in the strict sense of the term no longer exists. There are at least two parishes, however, namely Sheepstor and Belstone, which continue the traditional payments, although no longer required to render the feudal services, and the position of such parishes with regard to the full privileges conferred under the old system remains a debatable point.

The entire question as to the shooting rights upon the moors has constituted a perpetual source of friction, and so involved is the matter with its numberless side issues and conflicting points of view, that it has never yet been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. In the case of the ordinary Dartmoor Commoner, who in most cases has superseded the old Venville tenant, the position appears to be sufficiently straightforward. His rights and limitations upon his own parish common are defined under

ordinary common law, but, so far as one can judge from an unprofessional standpoint, he can claim no justification whatsoever for carrying a gun upon the Duchy side of the parish boundary. The right of the Duchy to prosecute for the killing of game was clearly established in an action brought against a visitor in 1920. In this case, however, it is argued by the Commoners that the question of Venville rights did not enter, and there seems to be some ground for the claim that the holders of such rights, though now confined to one or two parishes only, are in a somewhat stronger position than their fellow-moormen. Their claims, it would seem, are based upon the continued payment of the fees (purely nominal as these are, amounting only to a few shillings per annum), immemorial custom, and the permission to take "all that may do them good", which was mentioned in the document presented at a Survey Court for the Forest of Dartmoor, which was held at Okehampton in 1609.

They claim, moreover, that the express reservation of "venison", making no mention of other game, entitles owners and occupiers of land within these parishes to shoot, fish, or literally possess themselves of anything from which they might reasonably be supposed to derive benefit. The Duchy authorities, on the contrary, maintain that the much-discussed phrase can only entitle Venville tenants to the full enjoyment of rights of common as recognized by law. Shooting at any rate cannot be brought within this category. It has been argued, also, that the term "venison" might be held to apply to game of any description, as understood by the

custom of the period, and this attitude is further strengthened by the fact that in 1702 pheasants as well as deer were clearly recognized as constituting exceptions to the licence given to "Customary Tenants", whose position was held to correspond with that of the Venville men. It should further be taken into account that the pheasant is not in any sense a Dartmoor bird. It could scarcely exist upon the Forest, and, if placed there, would certainly forsake so unsuitable a habitat in search of conditions more congenial to its tastes and favourable to its economy. It is more than possible, therefore, that the term "pheasant" was a mere figure of speech, as comprehensive in its range as "verte and venison". It might be worth while to add that King John, when granting permission to certain persons to hunt various animals in Devon, makes no mention whatsoever of birds.

In this connection there arises a somewhat interesting point. It is argued that under legislation introduced during the reign of William III, "game" was defined as including hares, pheasants, partridges, heath- or moor-game, black game and bustards, and a great deal may hinge upon the question as to whether the veto upon the killing of deer and pheasants, if applicable to game generally, did not extend automatically with the passing of this law to all birds in this category.

There is also another point which, apparently, has been omitted from the argument. It is a little difficult to understand what benefit Venville tenants at so early a period could have derived from such extensive sporting rights—assuming their existence

—since, so far as one judge from legislation brought into force during the reign of Charles II, and strengthened by a further Act of Anne, few indeed of the old moorland people would have been in a position to enjoy such privileges. The importance or uselessness of this Act in reference to the Venville tenants' claim to ancient rights conferred is a matter for legal experts. I only mention it on account of its obvious interest and possible bearing upon a case never yet brought to the test in a Court of Law. By its provisions,

every person, not having lands or tenements of, or some other estate of, inheritance in his own or his wife's right of the clear yearly value of £100 ; or for a term of life, or having lease or leases of 99 years, or for any longer term of the clear yearly value of £150 ; other than the son or heir apparent of an esquire, or other persons of higher degree and the owners and keepers of forests, parks, chases, or warrens, being stocked with deer or conies for their necessary use in regard to the same forests, parks, chases, or warrens, are declared to be persons by the law of this realm, not allowed to have or to keep for themselves, or any other person, guns, bows, greyhounds, setting dogs, ferrets, coney dogs, lurchers, hays, nets, low bells, hare pipes, gins, snares, or other engines for the taking or killing of conies, hares, pheasants, partridges, or other game ; but shall be prohibited to have, keep, or use the same.

This Act, making no special provision for Venville tenants of Dartmoor, would certainly seem to cancel any peculiar privileges they may have possessed. The measure, moreover, only consolidated previous legislation passed during the reign of Richard II, which ruled that

no *layman*, who had not lands or tenements of forty shillings per annum ; or *clergyman* not being advanced to ten pounds



per year, shall keep any greyhound or hunting dog, nor use any instruments whatever for taking or destroying *gentlemen's* game, on pain of one year's imprisonment.

One may assume with tolerable certainty that the number of old-time Dartmoor villagers who could be brought within these categories was negligible, and that the practice of shooting game upon the Moor could not have been general. It could only have been confined to the gentry of the period, whose case must have been somewhat different from that of the ordinary Venville man. It seems only reasonable to suppose, moreover, that privileges at direct variance with common law would scarcely have been granted without specific mention being made of such exception. There is no apparent evidence that any exception was made. If such exists, however, the case of the Venville tenants might be considerably strengthened by its production. As the whole question appears to hinge almost entirely upon supposition and certain essential points, now practically impossible to establish, the deadlock, to all intents and purposes, seems absolute.

A touch of humour is added to the situation by the fact that neither of the disputing parties seems to possess the courage of its convictions, being reluctant to put the matter to the crucial test in a Court of Law. In either case one can understand the point of view. Individuals are naturally unwilling to venture the full length and permit themselves to be taken with guns upon the Forest, since in the event of losing the case, their legal position is merely that of common poachers. It is difficult,

again, to claim right by long custom, since within comparatively recent years "Duchy licences" were issued, entitling their holders to shoot upon the Forest. Country gentlemen, for the most part, availed themselves of this facility, thus establishing the Duchy's claim, while others, who doubtless shot for many years unlicensed, consist mainly of working men, who would experience considerable difficulty in proving "uninterrupted course of usage", and are confronted with further difficulty upon the subject of game certificates, which might easily arise, and which very few would be prepared to face.

The Duchy, upon the other hand, seem equally unwilling to press the few cases that come under notice, since in the event of inability to procure a conviction, the loss of prestige that would be involved is sufficiently obvious. A lifelong resident in a neighbouring moorland village for many years took out his Duchy licence scrupulously, and, since he spent a considerable time upon the Moor, he was asked to assist in the preservation of game by looking out for and reporting cases of poaching. This he did, soon catching a couple of men *in flagrante delicto*. The authorities, however, for no apparent reason declined to prosecute, and the matter ended unsatisfactorily for all concerned—except the poachers.

With the introduction of red grouse to Dartmoor the licensing system was abolished, to give the birds a fair chance, and now no shooting of any kind is countenanced upon the Forest, except under the special auspices of the Duchy. The subject of the Dartmoor grouse, together with their status and

future prospects, has developed into a "hardy annual" in the sporting Press. The accounts that one reads are inevitably conflicting, and—to residents in the district—frequently amusing, since, more often than not, such reports are merely based upon hearsay, or casual impressions. Briefly, their history is this :

They were first re-introduced in 1912, when a hundred pairs were turned down upon different parts of the Forest, and these birds for the most part took kindly to the Moor. Nor is there any valid reason why they should not do so, since the heather and grasses essential to their maintenance are indigenous to the country, while as for soil and climate, these conditions are practically identical with those under which grouse flourish in Ireland. It might be interesting to give a few extracts from an official statement made upon the progress of the birds some eight years later. In 1920, Mr. Peacock, then Secretary to the Duchy of Cornwall, stated that it was very gratifying to find that the grouse were firmly established. "Not only have they lived there," he said, "but they have bred, with the result that to-day there is quite a fair number of coveys on the moors. The grouse have established themselves most firmly on the eastern side, probably owing to its higher altitude generally, and also because it is dryer than the western areas." Later, Mr. Peacock remarked that "it was improbable that the Prince of Wales would shoot over the preserves in organized shoots for a couple or three years, in order to give the game a chance of breeding to a larger extent".

In 1920, indeed, the birds seemed to be comparatively plentiful. One might almost have imagined oneself upon the northern moors, so frequent was the familiar call-note wherever one walked among the hills. Both red and black grouse showed every sign of thriving, but none the less, the same year it was considered advisable to turn down another hundred pairs. From this period, however, the progress of the game ceased to be satisfactory, mainly owing to the increasing scarcity of heather, which, diminishing year by year as Scotch sheep became more numerous and burning more and more excessive, rendered the multiplication of red grouse almost impossible. His Royal Highness, therefore, is still waiting for the big grouse drives, and I was recently informed, when discussing the subject with the present Secretary, Major McCormick, that the Duchy no longer takes the case of the grouse very seriously. This is fortunate since I doubt if the entire Moor could now show as many birds as were actually introduced. A considerable number may be seen in certain localities, particularly the Warren Inn district, where some of the best heather is to be found. Their prosperity, indeed, depends entirely upon the presence or absence of this essential plant. Where the heather is at all consistent the grouse more or less hold their own, but there can be no denying that for every red grouse now upon the Dartmoor hills there should be a hundred. Last autumn, in the course of a walk from Belstone to Fur Tor and Dart Head, I neither saw nor heard a bird until reaching Cut Hill, where I flushed a pair, and shortly afterwards their young brood—very late

by the look of them—and I have no hesitation in asserting that upon no part of the Moor to-day can the red grouse be described as abundant, in the generally accepted sense of the word.

That other factors other than the conditions under which they live have been largely responsible for the failure of the birds to make good is sufficiently apparent. The Commoner freely accuses the mountain fox, who, even when innocent, has no means of refuting the charge, or of making the obvious and not unwarrantable counter-accusation. That a large number of grouse find their way into the moorside cottages is an open secret, and the naïve confessions of more than one local "scrounger" would probably astonish both the excise officers and the Duchy keeper. In this district there is scarcely a cottager who does not shoot red grouse, black game, or snipe upon the hills more or less openly, though few have ever considered it necessary to take out a game certificate. Upon the Commons at any rate the birds stand little chance, and it is no wonder that, all considered, they fail to multiply.

Whether the red grouse originally haunted the banks of the Dart is an interesting question, which naturally arises, the recent experiments having utterly disproved the theory that he cannot exist below the "line". If so, it must have been at a very remote date, since no record of his presence can be traced. However that may have been, it seems only appropriate that he, the only game-bird whose range is limited to the British Isles, should inhabit these wild hills, which, more than any other part

of the country, retain their primitive character. Incidentally, the present attempt to introduce or reinstate the species is not the first. Similar efforts were made in bygone years, though not within the lifetime of the oldest inhabitant. Men still live, however, who can call to mind how grey-beards of their own young days talked about the experiment being tried long ago, and as that carries one back a century or more to the days when few records were kept of such things, it is little wonder that no official data is to hand.

Upon these hills the red grouse as a rule remains faithful to the high points, lying for the most part upon wind-swept ridges, where there is little cover but the whortleberry growth and the all-prevailing boulders. Here in early May, where the sparse turf permits ling to grow, the richly tinted clutches of eggs are laid, sometimes on the lee side of a rock, but more frequently with no other shelter than that of the heather. As the high-climbing brakes of ling dry early, they are the more readily burned, and thus the red bird's brood is more liable to destruction by spring fires than the young of the black game, which for choice haunt the marshy hollows or the outskirts of wide morasses.

A large number of red grouse are certainly destroyed unwittingly by late swaling. That a certain amount of wilful destruction also takes place cannot be denied. There is a type of Commoner who, for some unaccountable reason, seems quite unable to leave the birds alone, and of this I recently saw a somewhat striking example. It occurred near the Blackavon Head, where I chanced upon a nest

containing ten eggs, which, judging from their weight, were heavily incubated. Being anxious to learn more of the fortunes of this little nursery, I revisited the spot a day or two later, only to find that the entire clutch had been removed. A party of turf-cutters had been at work not far away upon the occasion when I first found the nest, and these, having doubtless observed my movements, were the probable culprits. Most likely the eggs had been consigned to the frying-pan forthwith, or placed for experiment's sake under a barn-door hen. However that may have been, they had been removed by a human and not a four-footed enemy, since no shells or other tragic little relics remained in the nest.

The magnificent blackcock, indigenous and most characteristic of Dartmoor avifauna, still exists upon the moors, though he no longer haunts many of the outlying woods and coombes where he was so frequently flushed in former years. Having been re-introduced, at the moment he is most plentiful upon those parts of the Moor which have been given over to afforestation schemes, and in these districts, such as Fernworthy, for example, a considerable number may still be seen. One may even flush as many as twenty or thirty in the course of a walk, and it was there that seventeen were seen sitting in a row upon a stone wall a year or two ago, but this is scarcely an everyday experience. Upon the open moors he is no longer plentiful, although many people can remember the time when black game were so numerous on the bogs north of the Teign that every coombe and heather-crowded hollow resounded with their call-notes.

Surprisingly little has been written about the blackcock, for he is an interesting bird. There is, moreover, an old-world air about him, as of one who has outlived his generation. One feels that he should have passed with the bittern and the bustard, and such doubtless would have been his fate but for the measure of protection and assistance that he has received. But, beautiful bird as he is, wild and romantic as his personality may be, for the actual sport he gives, the blackcock, in my opinion, is a little overrated. He lacks both the activity and the *finesse* of the partridge, for example, and though hard to flush, when once in air he affords an easy shot. His flight, moreover, is slower than that of his red relative, and while a partridge or a red grouse usually skims low over the heath, a blackcock mounts steadily, and so presents a far simpler mark. His flights, too, are short, and if flushed repeatedly, he soon refuses to rise at all and resorts to pedestrianism pure and simple. Indeed, at one time, the moormen were actually in the habit of running black game down with cattle dogs—a trick only too easily practised, careful marking being all that is required. The mountain fox catches them in much the same way, and the birds have another curious weakness by means of which whole broods are easily taken.

John Bennett first informed me of this peculiarity of the black game, of which he was able to take frequent advantage when the birds abounded on the ranges, and he, like many others, lived entirely by his gun. There was little swaling in those days. Over many-thousand-acre sweeps luxuriant heather



stretched unbroken, cropping up here and there in tall, dense brakes through which no setter could work. These were the great strongholds of the black grouse, and the young birds which took refuge in such cover were seldom flushed again.

There one would suppose the matter ended. But not so where the "professional sportsman" was concerned. His business was to get game for market, by fair means or foul, and, failing the gun, there were other ways. According to Bennett when a young grouse gains thick cover it does not run, but squats close upon the ground, trusting to absolute stillness for self-preservation. It will not stir a feather no matter how near an enemy may come, and may be caught without difficulty if one has any idea as to its whereabouts. Upon one occasion he marked a pack into a brake covering about a quarter of an acre, and while an accomplice waited outside for possible fliers he hunted about, and picked up seven well-grown birds.

The explanation, or course, is simple. The habit of hiding becomes so fixed in the young birds that they adhere to it long after their wings have grown. Doubtless it stands them in good stead at times, but, like many wiser creatures, they are not always content to leave well alone. When a young grouse sees danger afar, as often as not he crows a challenge. Then, should the intruder approach, he sits tight until almost stepped upon. It is possible to walk into the very midst of a brood, and shoot one bird after another as they take unwilling wing. In these matters their habits vary according to the nature of the country. Where there is less cover

they fly far more readily, and no game-bird is capable of longer flights than the blackcock when he chooses to use his wings. Years ago, when black game were more numerous both here and upon Exmoor, they crossed freely from one forest to another, and during favourable weather were often seen flying over high in the gale.

There are more aristocratic game-birds, no doubt, and there are "fowls of the air" which give the sportsman a better run for his money, yet admitting the superiority of the "caper", and the stouter heart of the pheasant, nobody can deny that, in some respects at least, the blackcock stands alone. "Did ye ever shoot a blackcock, man?" inquired Dandie Dinmont of old, and when informed that his visitor had never as much as set eyes on that distinguished fowl, immediately promised him the pleasure of seeing, shooting, and eating a blackcock as the acme of British sport and hospitality.

In Scotland, it should be remarked, the blackcock is considered a bird of the woodlands rather than the open moors. There it roosts in the pines, feeds largely upon grain and other cultivated crops, and in its general manner of living more closely resembles the pheasant than any other bird. In Devonshire, on the contrary, the main habitat of the "old sort", as the country-people call the bird, has always been the heather, though strong partiality is shown for little brakes of birch or willow, or marshy hollows where a profusion of reed growth affords the cover they love. Here in the olden days they found everything necessary to their economy, abundant heather, abundant food, and though there were few trees in

which to roost, the age-old ling-brakes answered the purpose equally well. There was at any rate plenty of hiding-space, if no high perch was available, and even a fox had his work cut out to find the roosting birds.

Apart from generalities which apply to all game-birds, the black grouse has little in common with its red congener. The former species is polygamous, the latter pairs; the red bird rarely sets foot anywhere except upon the ground; the black variety only descends to earth when it can find no other perch. The red grouse is the best of mothers, the grey hen the worst, and while the former will never rest content if one of her chicks is missing until she finds it or learns its fate, the latter bothers little about stragglers, and appears to be quite happy as long as one or two of her brood are with her. During wet seasons a grey hen loses far more chicks than she rears. It is not remarkable, therefore, that black game are apt to disappear from localities where the red grouse contrives to hold its own.

The blackcock, again, is not content to keep out of sight, and when he might with advantage be skulking in cover, he must needs thrust himself into notice, and by his incorrigible habit of perching in plain view upon stone walls or the tip-top twig of a beech hedge, boldly defined against the winter sky, invites and frequently encounters destruction. The man with the gun has only to creep up under cover of the fence and pick him off at leisure.

Such was the fate a year or so ago of the last blackcock seen on Cosden Beacon. He was shot out of season and by an uncertificated sportsman. The

pity of it lay in the fact that the old "knight of the heath" had just gathered together a little seraglio of three females, and if unmolested, there should have been at least two broods upon the hill to replenish the stock.

## CHAPTER V

### MISTS AND MIRES

NOTHING could be more deceptive than mileage upon the Moor, and the pedestrian who makes a speciality of statistics invariably finds the record of his pedometer at startling variance with the ordnance map. This is due to the fact that a direct line between two distant points is never practicable owing to the numberless difficulties that the way presents. Of these the bogs constitute the most frequent obstacle, and they are of necessity far more numerous than the many mires entered upon the most comprehensive survey sheet. The nameless bogs indeed are numberless and one may encounter them literally anywhere, often in places where their presence might be least suspected. A spring above, almost invariably means a bog below, consisting in some cases of a narrow strip down the hillside or a matter of a square mile or so, according to the steepness of the gradient or other features of the locality. The stranger is therefore in frequent difficulties, and many times during the course of an ordinary walk or ride is faced with the necessity of completely altering his course or wading across a swampy area of apparently indefinite extent and unknown depth of quagmire.

Perhaps the most curious feature of the landscape is the remarkable absence of anything resembling a natural lake. This is the more noteworthy in view of the peculiarly wet character of the country. The main watershed of Devonshire, it is essentially a land of bursting springs and purling peat-streams. Devonshire is a well-watered county, and its main rivers, with the exception of the Exe and the Torridge, together with most of their tributary brooks have their source somewhere upon the great upheaval of peat and granite, yet nowhere in all the wild, wide panorama is there a pool or pond of sufficient size to catch the eye from any of the surrounding heights, or extensive enough to attract wild fowl in any considerable numbers. Needless to add, this remark refers solely to *natural* accumulation of waters, and does not apply to artificial reservoirs, such as Hennock and Burrator, or the various pools which have formed as the result of old workings on the outskirts of the Moor, of which Crazywell and Bradmere provide typical examples. In this connection a certain amount of perturbation has been caused in the Chagford district by the fact that the Plymouth Corporation has procured a considerable tract of moorland running northwards from Fernworthy, with a view to flooding it at some future time should occasion demand, to supplement the supply of town water now obtained from Hennock. There is no immediate prospect, however, of this proposition being actually carried into effect, although enclosures have already been made and the public is warned off the area, apparently with the idea of preventing the possible contamination of the springs

—a proceeding not altogether appreciated in the neighbourhood.

Of marshy hollows there are many, and these, curiously enough, are usually entered in guide-books or upon ordnance maps as “Pools”, whereas in truth they are nothing more than mires, the area which might in other parts of the country have been filled with water being usurped by oozy treacherous mud, of so tenacious a character in some instances that efforts to drain these dangerous hollows have been defeated by the slime itself, which swamps work and workmen alike with inexorable thoroughness.

The question as to whether the more extensive of these great natural depressions were ever lakes or even pools in the literal sense has given rise to endless discussion in the past, and as a general rule the early writers appear to have favoured the idea. It is at least interesting to note that Rowe, writing in 1848, refers to the famous Raybarrow Mire as a “little tarn”, but whether this should be regarded as a proof of definite change or dismissed as a mere error is a moot point. It seems scarcely conceivable that the character of the place should have altered so materially within the limited period that elapsed between Rowe’s perambulations and the conditions that have existed as long as the oldest residents can remember. It is also curious that, if such lakes indeed existed, no satisfactory theory has been advanced to account for the absorption or escape of the water. It should be remembered, moreover, that the character of the Dartmoor country is not so well adapted to the formation of lakes as many other districts, such as Westmorland, for example.

Not only are the slopes less precipitous, but the low-lying areas between the hills are more extensive, as a rule, by comparison, while the natural outlets are too numerous to allow the accumulation of water upon a large scale. The formation of the Moor is such that she is incapable of holding more water in her lap than her soil can absorb, and though a certain amount lies upon the surface of the bog-hollows, it is carried off by numerous channels the moment it exceeds the prescribed level. Indeed, under present conditions there is no depression upon the Moor sufficiently deep or sufficiently walled in by hills to contain a lake, without the construction of artificial dams, and this circumstance is in its way even more remarkable. It might be worth while to add that even a great mire does not necessarily consist of one unbroken expanse of slime. Its surface is frequently interrupted by heather-crowned ridges and outcrops of rock, which are raised well above the level of both the bog and its outlets, while only in certain spots is the depth of the mud very great.

In the strict sense of the term, a Dartmoor "mire" is quite distinct from the conventional bog. It is mainly caused by numberless springs, the ooze from the hills, which, debarred from immediate escape by the broken nature of the ground and the impervious granite beneath, is held by the soil as by a sponge. The green excrescences, known as "stables" among the country-people, are nothing more than the spring heads, where the turf has been lifted by the pressure of the water. These at times are raised to the height of several feet, forming the green mounds



which may be seen almost anywhere upon the hill-sides. When, as frequently happens, a spring dries up permanently, these mounds remain, gradually assuming the form of solid barrows, the sphagnum moss of which they are originally composed being replaced by ordinary moorland grass as the moisture drains away. Many of the mires possess a bad reputation, some of the most notable in this respect being Aune Head in the Holne district, Ruelake Pit on the Teign, Raybarrow pool (considered to be the most dangerous on Dartmoor), Redlake mires, not far from Huntingdon Warren, and formerly the grim morass known as Fox Tor Mire claimed a high place on the list. Mining operations in the locality, however, long ago deprived this bog of much of its terror, and nobody need now anticipate the dreary fate sketched by Davies. With most of these places, needless to say, it is rather a case of the "accident of fame". Many quite as formidable are practically unheard of, and the worst mire upon the artillery range has not even been granted the courtesy of a name, either upon the map or even among the moormen themselves.

These deep mires, or "pits" as they are termed in local parlance, constitute veritable death-traps, so far as the moorland cattle are concerned. They are particularly dangerous in early spring when their treacherous depth is increased by the long rainfall. The cattle also are in poor condition at this time of year, as the result of winter privations, upon which account the perilous lure of the bogs becomes all the more irresistible. People who lack intimate knowledge of the actual conditions frequently express

wonder at the ease with which cattle appear to become engulfed, also at the apparent absence of anything in the shape of a protective instinct which might be expected to warn the animals of their danger before it is too late. In reality, to a limited extent, the instinct is there. That animals fear the bogs is certain. The moment a horse finds himself upon soft ground, he begins to plunge as a rule in the frantic desire to extricate himself, and I have frequently seen bullocks floundering wildly back to firm turf when aware of the precarious nature of their foothold. As often as not, however, it is by means of these very struggles that they accentuate their difficulties. Too frequently they merely flounder into even deeper slime, and the moment a beast becomes unable to extricate its limbs it is doomed. Very few are actually drowned, or even suffocated. By far the greater number perish from the effects of exhaustion or chill, due largely to their weak state, which latter is indeed the principal cause of the trouble. The toll taken by the bogs is always heaviest during the lean months of March and April, when hunger induces the cattle to enter them. There is always most grass in the wettest places, together with emerald-green mosses which tempt the beasts to venture farther than prudence might dictate, and one false step is sufficient to land them in difficulties. It is nothing unusual to see the corpses of two or three bullocks or ponies in a pit no bigger than a tennis-court.

To human beings the danger is not great, as with the exercise of ordinary care one can usually keep out of serious difficulties. Now and again an in-

cautious step will land the unaccustomed pedestrian waist deep in a "stable", the sinister interpretation of which term is obvious. Upon such occasions, however, a scramble and a flounder or two quickly restore the unwary one to terra firma, and even a stranger is seldom caught twice in a similar trap. The advice always given by the moormen to the "stogged" is to keep going at any cost so that one has not time to sink very deeply. A man acquainted with the bogs can pick his way almost anywhere, whether mounted or afoot. It often happens that deep and dangerous places are scaled over with a top crust which will bear a man stepping with care, though cattle frequently break through and are lost in consequence. Indeed, with the exercise of a little discrimination one can cross bogs which even the moormen consider impassable.

I saw a somewhat amusing example of this when out with Mr. Raleigh Phillpott's hounds a few years ago. The scene was a great morass near the Black-avon Head, sprinkled with bog-cotton and treacherous moss-hags visible here and there amongst the coarse grass and rushes. Hounds were busy, drawing the bog, their huntsman on foot among them, when I chanced to notice an elderly countryman perched upon a high rock and watching the proceedings with more than casual interest. Approaching him, I found that his gaze was centred upon the Master rather than the hounds, for which circumstance he soon supplied the following cogent reason: "I'm looking to see un sink any moment. 'Tis a ter'ble dangerous place he's on, though he don't sim to know it." It had never occurred to him to utter

a word of warning, regarding the matter merely in the light of an interesting problem as to whether the Master would or would not experience a decidedly unpleasant immersion.

There is an old Dartmoor saying to the effect that "where rushes grow a horse can go", but I would not recommend the inexperienced to place complete confidence in a proverb which is subject to so many obvious qualifications.

The great peat-bogs are of an entirely different character from the mires. While the latter are encountered for the most part in the hollows, the peat lies mainly upon high ground, covering enormous areas of which the great waste of Cranmere is a notable example. This is by far the largest individual bog in Devonshire. It extends in every direction well beyond the actual limits of Cranmere, which forms no more than its centre, like the body of an octopus, and reaching long arms into the surrounding wilderness, it embraces a more or less unbroken expanse of some twelve to fifteen square miles.

Visitors to Cranmere Pool sometimes complain of the absence of anything in the nature of effective scenery. One can see nothing, they say, but a dour and seemingly illimitable tableland of brown undulations, grim and desolate beyond description. This is true, but the very desolation of which they complain is surely the identical feature that they have tramped many hard miles to see. They miss the real point of the proceeding, failing to recognize that they are looking away into the stern wild heart of the Moor itself.

Though less formidable in some respects than the mires, these great peat-bogs, or "veins", as they are called—the expression being a local corruption of the word "fen"—are in reality more difficult to negotiate. They consist of interminable humps and ridges, intersected by multitudinous natural dykes and waterways, and one's progress across the waste involves the necessity of taking a jump at every few paces from one quaking mound to another—an exhausting process—with the alternative of wading knee-deep through black mud and water should the intervening cavity prove too wide. The depth of the peat layer varies considerably, according to locality. Upon the hilltops it might be anything from five to ten feet; in the hollows and upon Cranmere itself, considerably more. To cattle, it is certainly less dangerous, mainly on account of the fact that the inducement to enter soft places is not so great. The peat, indeed, offers very little pasturage, and though one frequently comes across Scotch sheep which scurry away along the waterways, or leap the crevasses like goats, comparatively few bullocks enter these bogs. Occasionally one meets them, however, and I have always retained a ludicrous impression of a black calf, which, having lost its companions somewhere in the swampy maze, suddenly emerged from the veins near Dart Head and came along an open space towards me, neck outstretched and tail straight on end, with the comical desperate velocity peculiar to its kind. All alone as the little beast was in that solitary place, I wondered for the moment what strange animal I had encountered. One might almost have mistaken

it for the famous Black Dog of the Moor in ghostly person. Possibly the origin of that ancient spectre might be traced to a similar source.

The peat-hills offer at best treacherous riding-ground, traversible by prescribed routes only, and intimate knowledge of the country is eminently necessary before they can be negotiated with any security. Old bridle-paths across boggy land of any description are still indicated in places by white stones upon either side of the tracks for the guidance of benighted wayfarers, and disregard of these warning signals now and again leads to disaster. The occupier of an outlying holding, who had somehow earned the dislike of his neighbours, was lured to grief a few years ago in a curiously simple manner. Taking advantage of his absence at the local market town, a few of his acquaintances carefully removed the landmarks at a point where the track to his homestead crossed a swampy valley, with the result that the good farmer, steering an uncertain and somewhat hilarious course by starlight a few hours later, found himself immersed in deep mud as a special reward for his sins.

One finds that the most popular anecdotes are the obviously impossible. It is not surprising therefore that the stock story of the bog-engulfed horseman whose presence under the moss was only made evident by the hat which still remained upon his head, is circulated even to-day, and in some cases, for all its absurdity, almost believed. This fictitious incident, however, suggests another—an actual occurrence of a very different character—in which a Dartmoor bog was made to serve a somewhat

unusual purpose. A gentleman living in a well-known West Country town possessed a strong taste for entomology, and one morning, armed with a butterfly-net, he set out for a famous mire of ill repute where dragon-flies of many kinds abound. He never returned, and the inevitable hue and cry ensued. Search-parties in which the lost man's wife played a prominent part scoured the moors, and at last, blowing about upon the brink of the ill-famed mire, his hat was found, and farther in, apparently dropped in the course of his frantic struggles to extricate himself, the unfortunate entomologist's butterfly-net. The black slime told no more of the tragic story, however. To drag the mire was obviously impossible, and nothing further could be done. A verdict of accidental death was passed unanimously, nobody doubting that the luckless gentleman had pursued his harmless quest too far across ground of which he had no knowledge. The heart-broken widow speedily left the district, and there the matter ended, until time, and not the bog, at last gave up its secret. It transpired that for reasons of his own the principal actor in the affair had desired, at least officially, to surrender existence, and the deadly reputation of the mire had suggested a means of effecting the desired object without the uncomfortable necessity of suicide. The hat and net were not irreplaceable. A family reunion upon foreign soil was only a matter of previous arrangement, and, all considered, a journey by sea and rail seemed a less-drastic undertaking than emigration to another world. One is inclined to wonder whether the escaped convict who more or

less officially sank in Fox Tor Mire many years ago solved his difficulties in a similar manner.

Generally speaking, that ghostly product of the swamp, *Ignis Fatuis*, is not a common feature of the Dartmoor mires, and the attitude of the country-people towards the phenomenon is somewhat uncertain. The greater number of them regard it merely in the light of an unearthly apparition, and have never even heard of it as the result of purely natural processes. It is somewhat curious that the poetical notion which still exists, to the effect that the phosphorescent gas is in reality the spirit of some beast that perished in the mire, should come so near the literal truth. That it is supernatural, however, and mischievously if not malignantly disposed, none of them doubt, and upon this account some of the more practically minded men are frankly sceptical of its very existence.

Baring Gould, curiously enough, attributes its comparatively rare appearance upon the Moor to the scarcity of animal matter, remarking that "so few cattle are lost" in the mires. Conditions must have undergone a remarkable change since his time, for if the production of the Jack-o'-lantern indeed depends upon the amount of decomposing animal matter, the Dartmoor bogs should be the very home of "corpse candles". Actually, it is more than probable that the ghostly phenomenon is not so rare an occurrence upon these moors as the limited number of recorded instances would lead one to believe. The deepest mires, it should be remembered, lie far back, usually screened from view by an impenetrable wall of hills, and seldom indeed are



they approached after dark, particularly during the time of year when will-o'-the-wisps are most active. It is as a rule a late summer or autumn apparition, and since the days are still long enough during this period for all ordinary purposes, even the moormen have little occasion to be out on the hills after sundown. A thousand Jack-o'-lanterns might be alight upon many of the great lonely swamps without a human soul being any the wiser. Again, there are numerous bogs where it might appear within easy view of a roadway, or of human habitations, and in such places it may even be seen at times by the casual passer-by and mistaken for a cottager's lantern. Usually, it is the commonplace that is mistaken for the curious or remarkable. In this instance the case might conceivably be reversed, though this is not likely to happen frequently. It should be remarked that the Dartmoor will-o'-the-wisps have almost invariably been seen in more or less inhabited localities. It is only reasonable to assume, therefore, that at least an equal number occur away upon the wild moors where nobody can observe them.

A neighbouring farmer once had a somewhat unusual experience with a Jack-o'-lantern. His land adjoins a large tract of moorland, and the outlying fields, being good partridge ground, were frequently poached in former years. Not so long ago, it was a common practice when netting partridges by night to attach a lantern to the collar of a steady old setter, which not only served to notify its whereabouts, but also "held" the covey when the dog drew to a point, so facilitating the work of netting

them. Late one September night, a neighbour came in to warn the farmer that poachers were at their favourite game in his fields, the light being plainly visible, and, anxious to catch the offenders red-handed, he got his gun, and set out to do battle, accompanied by the informant. Looking over a gate, they espied the light in the same field. It was coming slowly towards them. The light rose and fell with a motion much resembling that of a dog's head when ranging, and, being about the right height above ground, neither of the men were in any doubt as to its true character. Up it came, gliding alongside the hedgerow, then swung out across the open field in front of them. Being a pitch-black night, nothing could be seen but the actual flame. The farmer, however, desired to see no more, and as the light drew level with the gateway he raised his gun, intending to discharge its contents within uncomfortable proximity of the supposed poaching dog's tail. At that moment, however, the strange lantern for no apparent reason suddenly soared several feet into the air, and the astonished men were confronted with the disconcerting apparition of a pale flame floating through space without perceptible means of volition.

The foregoing incident constituted a genuine case of *Ignis Fatuis* being mistaken for an artificial light, and there can be little doubt that originally there existed ample ground for the will-o'-the-wisp's alleged propensity for luring people into difficulties. It is quite possible that this circumstance was also the origin of the old but not entirely extinct idea of being "pixy led", since the country-folk of olden

days may easily have connected the ghostly light with the activities of the "little people" who might naturally have been credited with this method of deluding the benighted.

Sinister as is the reputation that the bogs have acquired, Dartmoor is invested with another and far more serious menace to those unacquainted with her strangely varying moods and aspects. The spaces are vast and desolate, and those who wander far from the beaten tracks should always bear in mind the fact that the mists roll up with startling suddenness, and from being merely the scene of a pleasant ramble under blue skies and bright sunshine, the great lonely Moor is suddenly converted into a chill, grey, featureless wilderness from which escape is difficult.

There is an accepted truism to the effect that the man whom horse has never thrown cannot ride, and upon the same principle one may rest assured that anybody who makes the boast of having never lost his way in a Dartmoor mist has not encountered very many. The mist, like everything else, is variable in its character. Upon certain days it does little more than veil the high points or obscure the near distance; upon others it envelops the landscape in a pall so dense that objects twenty yards away become only dimly visible, rendering the task of steering a direct course across the trackless heath practically impossible.

But the danger—if one may call it so—is not only for the novice. I have myself many times experienced the sudden bewilderment when the white wraiths, drifting like a troop of ghosts, all in a

moment obliterate every familiar landmark ; when sound is smothered as with a cloak ; when each boulder or patch of ling assumes a terrifying sameness, and he who turns once, or for an instant neglects to concentrate all his faculties upon direction, is inevitably lost. The stranger, taken at a disadvantage and deprived of the slightest indication as to his bearings, usually adopts one of two courses. He either sits down under shelter of a boulder and waits for the mist to lift—often the most sensible course—or he starts to walk frantically in the direction that he believes to be the right one, and as an inevitable consequence walks in circles. Very characteristic is the experience of two campers, who set out from their tent in Tiger Marsh to walk to the village of South Zeal. The mist was thick when they started, but being perfectly intimate with the way they anticipated no difficulty. They soon realized, however, that they had lost all sense of direction and locality, and after four hours of solid walking over seemingly unknown and pathless wastes, they were amazed to find themselves actually walking into their own tent, from which in all probability they had never wandered as much as a quarter of a mile.

The moormen, when overtaken by the mist, make no attempt to find their way, as a matter of course leaving the problem to be solved by their ponies. They simply drop the reins on the animals' necks and set them going, with the comfortable assurance, bred of long experience, that the clever little beasts will "bring them off". An old turf-cutter whose work took him out upon the fringe of Cranmere,

from which escape when the "mists came down" was no easy matter, was invariably accompanied by an old-fashioned sheep-dog, to whose collar, when in doubt as to the way, he would attach a string, and give the order "Git 'ome". The dog never failed to take the shortest cut to the homeward track.

The terror of the mists has doubtless been exaggerated by lovers of the sensational. Equally misleading upon the other hand is the more modern tendency to represent the danger as negligible, and anyone who neglects to observe ordinary precautions may find himself in a position the reverse of enviable. Many suggestions have been advanced for the guidance of befogged individuals. As a general rule, however, these prove of little practical value for the plain and natural reason that so much depends upon circumstances. The wisest policy in one case might prove disastrous in another. As a rule it is merely a matter of common sense, and the man who keeps his wits, after making a false turn or two, usually succeeds in discovering some clue as to his whereabouts.

The stereotyped advice to strike a stream and follow its course is a somewhat desperate measure which one would only advocate as a last resource. The waterways are long and devious, winding more often than not through bogs and heart-breaking clitters, and may easily land the unfortunate pedestrian in even greater difficulties. A river of whose course one has some knowledge may prove useful at times to indicate direction. On the other hand, an unknown stream which may be flowing towards any quarter of the compass is the most untrustworthy


guide. True, it will eventually lead one to civilization, but not necessarily before nightfall, or to any place within twenty miles of the point desired. Even the tyro, anxious to get off the Moor at any cost, scarcely wishes to miss his objective by too wide a margin, while the normal man would risk a good deal rather than make so signal an admission of complete helplessness.

When lost in a district where streams are so numerous, and—to the stranger—so similar, nothing is easier than to strike the wrong one. This was the recent experience of two men from Chagford, who, caught by the mist upon the return walk from Cranmere Pool, wandered helplessly about until they stumbled on a watercourse which they supposed to be that of the Teign. They followed it by moonlight through mire and over boulder, making the best headway possible, and at daybreak, when the mist lifted, found themselves at Tavistock.

Speaking from personal experience, once only have I found a stream of any material value when in difficulties. Upon that occasion, caught in a blizzard upon the wilds of Broad Marsh, with blinding snow-dust obliterating every object even at the distance of a few yards, the voice of the "tiny Dart" tinkling along its dark, narrow bed was a distinctly welcome sound. Even then, as it happened, my course was the reverse of the conventional, as it better suited my purpose to follow the stream to its head rather than its downward course towards civilization.

That a man befogged may find himself in a position of real difficulty or even danger is true enough, however, but such is the reputation of the moor mists

that panic frequently proves the real enemy. Many people upon whose behalf search-parties have been requisitioned are discovered actually within sight and sound of civilization, with clearly defined tracks to indicate the way. A woman, lost while crossing from Belstone to Okehampton a year or two ago, was found the following morning sitting in a "splinter-proof" where she had taken refuge, although the artillery track which she had been following could not have been missed by anyone possessed of eyesight.



## CHAPTER VI

### BY LONELY STREAMS

It may be true that Dartmoor Forest loses some of its possible grandeur by the absence of lakes or tarns. On the other hand, the unrivalled beauty of the numerous moorland streams more than compensates for the lack of still-water effects. "Than fair Dartmeet", wrote Davies,

A sweeter spot was never seen,

and everything written in picturesque description of the "cruel Dart" and her wild course between brake and boulder applies with equal truth to her sister streams, the Teign, the Tavy, the Okement, the Taw, and many others which have birth in the wild country that extends, roughly from Hangingstone Hill over Cranmere, Black Ridge and Little Kneeset to Long Ammicombe and Fur Tor.

There exists a curious convention even to-day to the effect that three Devonshire rivers, namely, the Teign, the Taw and the Dart, have their source in Cranmere Pool. Actually, none of these streams has even one of its many heads within half a mile of the little bog-encircled depression of which the "pool" forms an insignificant centre. As I remarked in a previous chapter, the famous little hollow has in truth but one outlet, down which



escapes a peat-stained runnel, which, reinforced by other rills from the surrounding "veins", forms the south-easterly fork of the turbulent West Okement.

England can show few more picturesque valleys than that of the West Okement, although the scenery, perhaps, is scarcely characteristic, suggesting Westmorland rather than Devonshire. The wild stream, still dark with the taint of its native peat, comes swirling down its six-mile gorge in a succession of long curling sweeps, running the gauntlet between heather banks, mountain slopes and granite tors, purling over long boulder-strewn reaches, plunging headlong into rocky defiles, taking its course the while through some of the most interesting country that even Dartmoor can produce.

The highest points in southern England overlook the West Okement. Its banks still echo the black-cock's call, while along its eastern flank there straggles Black Tor Copse, least known of Dartmoor's three natural woods, grotesque, romantic, crow-haunted, the favourite resting-place of the wilder feathered pirates, the home of the viper, the main stronghold of the mountain fox.

Not so many years ago, the robber birds and the foxes had the wilds of Black Tor Copse very much to themselves. A grey mist of scrubby wood, it nestles under the windswept shoulder of High Willhayes, so walled in by sheltering hills that even to-day the tourist who dutifully mounts the long ascent of Yes Tor, to overlook the fine panorama of the Cornish Peninsula spread wide below, has little idea of its existence. Within recent years, however, a certain number of fishermen find their way up-

stream from Meldon Viaduct, and nowadays the thin scream of a reel is almost as common a sound upon the river-bank in summer as the raven's croak or the sandpiper's whistle.

From the fisherman's point of view, there is not a great deal to choose between the smaller streams. For the most part, they are plentifully stocked with trout, though the more accessible reaches of water are now somewhat over-fished. Excellent sport may still be enjoyed, however, by anyone who cares to follow the streams to their upper waters. From either the East or West Okement, for example, a fisherman of ordinary ability may easily land fifty trout in the course of a day. Most of these fish are small, of course, the largest rarely exceeding seven or eight ounces in weight, although their remarkable sweetness and flavour more than atone for their lack of size. The moorland fisherman, indeed, may depend upon quantity if not quality. Two men who last summer fished the West Okement upon various occasions from Vellake Corner to Dinger Point rarely returned with less than a hundred fish in their baskets. Possibly, the measurements of some of these would not have borne too critical a test, but this is always a delicate point.

One has a shrewd suspicion that too many modern fishermen are not overscrupulous upon the matter of restoring under-sized fish to their native element. Indeed, in this connection, as in so many others, authority seems to be unduly lax, a great number of trout being taken from the moorland streams by illegitimate means every year. This is largely facilitated by the number of old mill-leats and other

artificial waterways, some of them still in use, which have been constructed from time to time for mining operations. Near the head-waters of even the main rivers, it is not always difficult to divert the course of the stream for a considerable distance along alternative channels, which were either cut in former years, or have been washed out in times of flood, and, this accomplished, nothing could be simpler than to pick out the fish. At the head of Taw Marsh, near the point where the river forks to embrace the mountainous flanks of Steeperton, may be seen examples of alternative channels, which are utilized, I am told, for this illicit purpose.

The mill-leats, being permanent waterways, provide an even easier method by which the larger trout of the lower streams are frequently poached. The dropping of a hatch some quiet Saturday afternoon serves the desired purpose, and within a few minutes the bed of a leat—a matter, perhaps, of a quarter of a mile—is denuded of its finny life. The proceeding is rendered more simple by the fact that the waterway frequently runs between steeply cut banks, the sides of which are sometimes walled, the operations of the pilferers being thus screened from view, except from the bank itself. A leat of this type, fed by Taw water, runs at the foot of my garden, the actual stream being almost invisible, and one is only warned of mischief afoot by the unaccustomed silence when the water has been diverted. The trout caught by this means are hawked through the village without shame or reserve, and certain residents even so far depart from the proprieties as to commission them in advance. To catch the

offenders red-handed should not be a difficult matter, one would have thought, but an attempt to do so upon the part of the village constable not long ago proved peculiarly disastrous to the Majesty of the Law. Noticing that the flow of water had ceased with suspicious suddenness, the astute officer entered the bed of the leat—unwisely from the lower end—and soon sighted the culprits, who promptly took to their heels. Up the muddy, shingly passage splashed pursuer and pursued. The boys, however, being fleeter of foot, reached the outlet first, and, seized with a bright inspiration, raised the hatch, introducing a flood of water, by which means the unfortunate constable was subjected to a thorough and most ignominious cold bath.

Licence to fish legitimately in the main Dartmoor rivers can usually be obtained from the hotel-keepers in moorland villages, and long after the streams have left the moors behind them, riparian rights for the most part are easily procurable, either gratis, or at an almost nominal price. The farmers, as a rule, are remarkably generous in this respect, readily granting permission to fish and seldom accepting remuneration. As the streams approach cultivated land, however, the angler's task is rendered more difficult by the overgrown character of the banks, which shield fine fish, but, being fringed with alder and sycamore growth for miles at a stretch, make the casting of a fly no easy matter. There are usually open reaches, however, which can be worked by the exercise of a little ingenuity.

Salmon run up these streams a considerable distance, although natural weirs and frequent waterfalls

prevent them from ascending as far as they might, were it not for such obstructions. Formerly, certain lands in North Devon were held upon the provision that "should the Lord of Dartmoor pursue the chase over the neighbouring waste of Exmoor", the proprietors of such manors were obliged "to drag the Taw or the Torridge for the finest salmon procurable", with which to supply the princely table. Needless to say, very few big fish are taken actually from forest waters, while around the outskirts of the Moor again, a greater number meet their end by nefarious means than are landed by the fisherman. "Years ago", according to the testimony of old residents, salmon-poaching was almost a recognized industry upon the lower Teign and Dart, and even nowadays the royal fish provides not infrequent fare among the cottage homes of Devon. The owner of a large mill on the Lyd tells me that to his certain knowledge a considerable number of salmon are speared by his workmen every year from the banks of his mill-dam and under the hatches. An ordinary garden fork is the weapon employed for this branch of river craft, at which some of the men become all too adept. Incidentally, it is not as easy as it sounds, a great deal of skill being required in making due allowance for the refraction of the water. I well remember a most interesting description of pike-spearing by torchlight given in that delightful old book *Peter Penniless*, which I read many years ago, but which now seems to be unprocurable. Anyone who is lucky enough to possess it will obtain a tolerable idea of the methods employed by the lawless fishermen of the Dartmoor waters.

The same mill-owner also told me a curious thing which is, I think, worthy of repetition. The Lyd, like all mountain streams, is liable to sudden risings, due to storms away in the hills, and upland tributary brooks swelling in consequence. Occupiers of riverside holdings as often as not receive no warning of these sudden incursions of water, but the voles and common rats which inhabit the banks are wiser in their generation, and invariably seek safe quarters before their burrows are flooded out, trekking in considerable numbers across the adjoining meadow. This foreknowledge upon the rodents' part is only to be expected, as most wild creatures appear capable of sensing any impending natural disturbance. The wonder in this case lies rather in the fact that the mill-cats—of which numbers are kept—appear to be equally alive to the situation, and may be seen lining the river-banks an hour or so before the migration begins. The mill-hands, my informant assures me, are frequently warned of an approaching flood by the behaviour of these cats.

One sometimes wonders what happens to otters when hill-streams, coming down in sudden flood, overflow their banks. Presumably the water pressure is sufficient to swamp the most carefully designed holt, and an otter cannot exist under water for an indefinite period. Does he swim ashore and wait until the height of the flood rolls by, or does he drift with the current away down river? And what about young cubs? Many of these, like the young of the water-vole, must be caught, one would think, by the spring and autumn floods. Do they perish like young rabbits in their nesting-burrows during a

rainy spring, or are they rescued by their highly intelligent and courageous parents ? That is a question to which nobody can supply the answer, but since an otter will remove her litter from danger of another sort, in the very face of a human enemy—a proceeding which I have actually witnessed—it is not too much to suppose her capable of performing a similar act when the peril threatened is a purely natural one.

These sudden risings of the Dartmoor rivers are not a frequent occurrence, which is fortunate, since during their brief tempestuous course they are exceedingly destructive. So brief is their duration, indeed, that a stream may swell to an unprecedented height and return to its normal level within the space of an hour or so. A farmer who has lived beside the Taw for more than forty years recently told me that he has never actually witnessed the impressive phenomenon, although his holding has been swept by disastrous floods several times within my memory. As a general rule the more destructive inundations are not the result of excessive rainfall in the ordinary course of events, but are usually caused by some abnormal development such as the sudden thawing of deep snow, a cloud-burst somewhere on the uplands, or, as happened in the autumn of 1929, when torrential rains succeed a period of drought. Upon the occasion named, the hardened ground seemed incapable of absorbing the surface water, which the river channels in their turn were unable to carry. The Taw, sweeping down its long gradient from the Moor in imposing flood, carried all before it, demolishing every light bridge in its

course, and licking up not only growing crops, but the fields and gardens themselves, leaving behind a wide track stripped to bedrock level. Not a soul witnessed this mighty rush of water for the first ten miles of its course at least. It occurred at midnight, leaving only the unmistakable record of its doings to tell the story.

Upon the whole the moorland streams are not prolific of bird-life. They are too turbulent to provide an ideal habitat for the conventional moorhen and kingfisher, and though the mallard nests upon the more placid upper reaches of the main rivers, the Moor cannot be described as good wild-fowl country. But if the common water-birds prefer homelier brooks, there are other and more interesting varieties which appreciate the peat-streams.

The bright little dipper is always here, flashing across the dark pools and among the shadows of the rocks, but, owing to his more retiring habits, he is less in evidence than his more aggressive relative, the ring-ouzel, whose harsh chatter during the summer months provides one of the most characteristic accompaniments to a Dartmoor river's "cry".

It is not, I think, generally realized that, according to Burt, the famous White Bird of Oxenham owes its origin to the ring-ouzel. He quotes from Howell as follows :

Being in a lapidary shop in Fleet Street (July 3rd, 1632), I observed a marble inscribed : "Here lies John Oxenham, a goodly young man, in whose chamber, as he was struggling with the pangs of death, a bird with a white crest was seen fluttering about his bed, and so vanished."

Commenting upon this and similar occurrences, he adds :

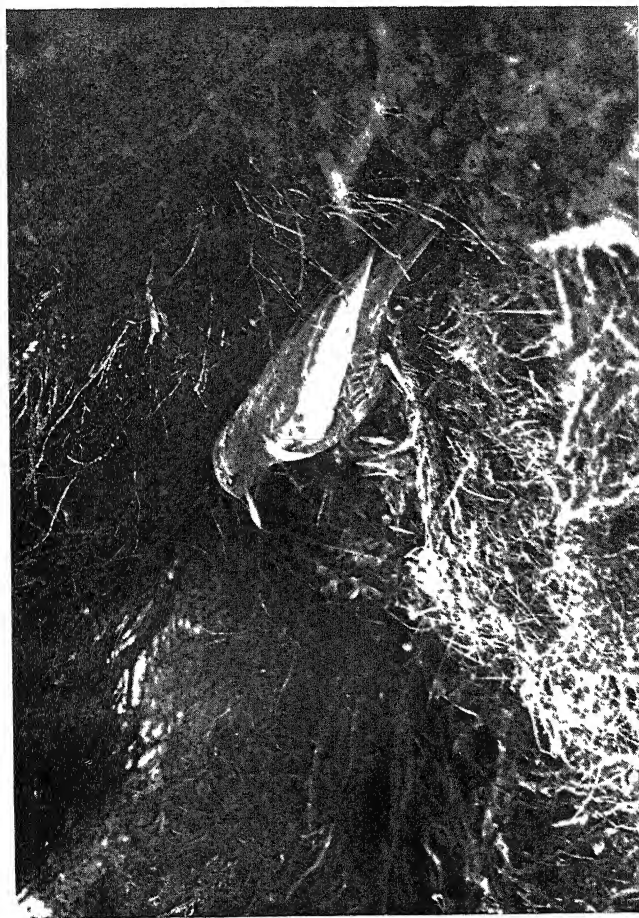


The accidental appearance of this bird at Oxenham, attracted thither by the light in the sick chamber or by some other cause, may have given rise to this tradition, and more particularly as the Moor is close to South Tawton, and the Ring Ouzel frequents that part of it. There is no other rational mode of accounting for so singular a circumstance. This happening in one instance, was extended by superstition to other cases of death in the same family.

It is easy to trace the metamorphosis through the inevitable stages of exaggeration. From the ring-ouzel with snowy collar to the "white-crested" and, subsequently, the "white-breasted" bird are easy steps, and it is only natural that later apparitions should assume the customary garb of ghostly visitors, the historic bird finally appearing in tradition, like Tom Pearce's old mare, "ghastly white".

Burt's theory is rendered the more plausible by two facts. Not only must the ancient manor-house have stood in those days upon the very brink of the Moor, but it is virtually encircled by two wild streams upon whose banks the ring ouzel may conceivably have nested. Only last summer, by curious chance, I was called upon by the present occupier of Oxenham to identify a bird that had become established upon one of these streams. One would like to be able to say that a ring-ouzel from the hills—some remote descendant of the celebrated banshee bird—had returned to the haunts of its distinguished ancestor. It proved, however, to be its next of kin, a dipper, upon whom perhaps the mantle had fallen.

The ring-ouzel, indeed, throughout its history appears to have been the cause of considerable perplexity among old naturalists. To the end of his life Gilbert White never solved the mystery of its



RING-OUZEL AT HER NEST HAVING JUST FED HER YOUNG

*From a photograph by Frances Pitt*



breeding range and habits. "I am seized with wonder," he wrote in 1769, "and long to be informed whence these travellers come and whither they go." Even now, perhaps, this exceedingly local species is little known to the majority of people. An old countryman, when asked to define a carrion crow, described it as "a rook by hisself", and the ring-ouzel can be almost as graphically summarized. He is, in a word, the blackbird of the moors, the only difference between the species to be detected by the casual observer being the famous "ring", which identifies the upland bird at a glance. In general habits and characteristics the two species bear the same marked resemblance. The predilection for fruit, which so often brings about the blackbird's downfall at the gardener's hands, is shared in equal measure with his representative of the hills, and during midsummer the ouzel spends the greater part of his time among the whortleberries, upon which he feeds almost exclusively. He has also a pronounced liking for wild strawberries, and for this reason he frequents the long-abandoned tin- and copper-mines, where, in favourable localities, these plants sprinkle the overgrown slag-heaps.

The nest of the ring-ouzel so closely resembles that of a blackbird that a practised eye is required to distinguish between them. In choosing its site, the bird displays marked originality. An old stonemason told me of a pair which nested on a ledge far down the shaft of a disused copper-mine. I have found the nest upon the ground among the roots of a gorse-bush half a mile from water; upon the practically bare summit of a rock, and in almost

every imaginable site along the heathery banks of the streams. Two broods are sometimes reared, although the second clutch may consist of two or three eggs only.

Baring Gould, whose ornithology is not always above criticism, makes a curious mistake in describing these birds as perennial residents upon the moors. As a rule they remain until the supply of mountain-ash berries is consumed, when they move to the lowlands for a few days, frequently invading the cottage gardens, where, as often as not, they are mistaken for freak blackbirds. With the exception of mountain foxes and vipers which take toll of all young bird-life, they appear to have few natural enemies, and it is somewhat curious that they are not more numerous. Like many other species, however, their status remains much the same, one pair haunting a particular reach of a stream year after year. A white ring-ouzel for several seasons frequented the Blackavon valley between Culliver Steps and New Bridge—a not unusual freak of plumage, which possibly throws yet further light upon the Oxenham legend.

Upon the whole, perhaps, the heron is not so common on the upland streams as one might naturally suppose. He is there, of course, but he does not seem to take full advantage of the protection that the great wet wastes and lonely little pools would certainly afford him. Possibly like the kingfisher, he finds the currents too rapid to suit his style of fishing. There are numberless places, however, where he might pursue his patient tactics with advantage, but where, curiously enough, he is seldom seen.

Well known as the bird is, the country-people still persist in bestowing upon him the misnomer of "crane", and there are still many Devonians who would scarcely recognize the grey long-legged custodian of the trout-streams by his true ornithological title. Owing doubtless to the fact that heronries are now few and far between, surprisingly little is known of his habits, and to most people he is nothing more than a grey shape rising from the water-side upon wide creaking wings, or steering a somewhat devious course across the sky, to the accompaniment of the harsh, far-sounding call by means of which the heron so frequently proclaims his whereabouts. Moreover, being largely nocturnal in his habits, one seldom has the opportunity of watching this expert fisherman at work, although it is possible now and again to surprise him when standing as though lost in reflection under some shelving bank. The heron has many quaint and interesting ways, not least of which is his quite unaccountable habit of somersaulting in mid-air. I have seen one of these birds drop a hundred feet as if shot, then recover its poise with a flourish of great wings and remount to repeat the performance. The effect was grotesque in the extreme.

According to old writers, otters did not "plentifully" upon Dartmoor waters in bygone years. It is probable, however, that they have always been more numerous upon the wilder streams than was supposed. The waterways are so numerous, the strongholds so extensive, that even hounds can scarcely expect to find an animal so elusive. The otter, again, does so little to attract attention that he

might remain long in a locality without anyone being aware of his presence. He is, moreover, a tireless wanderer, covering enormous distances between sun-down and dawn, particularly when freshwater fish are running seawards, and more often than not, he is many miles away long before any record of his doings is discovered by possible ill-wishers.

Apart from his legitimate destroyers, the otter's worst enemy is the sporting loafer. I remember the story of a campaign waged by a rabbit-trapper against a wily old "dog" who haunted a little hill-stream near my home. After almost every conceivable device had failed, the otter was caught at last in a somewhat unusual manner. The animal, so read the spoor, was in the habit of using a little water-slide between two rocks, and it occurred to the man as a last resource to set a fox-trap at the foot of this miniature cascade. This contrivance a few nights later proved the otter's undoing. To catch him alive with a view to subsequent baiting had been the trapper's aim, but in this respect yet once again the old pirate scored off his enemy. The trap had been pegged with a stake strong enough, the man thought, to hold a bullock. None the less, the otter succeeded in "pulling" it, and dragging the whole contrivance some fifty yards downstream, where he was eventually discovered drowned in a pool across which he had been unable to swim.

Few people, perhaps, realize how very easily an otter drowns. The tendency is to regard him as a sort of four-legged fish, but in reality he can remain under water for a short period only. Anybody who has watched a "chain", which is the line of bubbles

that an otter blows when swimming deep, must have noticed the increasing frequency of the bubbles when the swimmer has been under water for any length of time. This is an indication that he is hard pressed for air, and even when beset by hounds, his life depending upon his ability to keep out of sight, I have seen him come to the surface again and again for no other purpose than to fill his lungs.

But though incapable of long immersion, the water is his natural element. He will float for hours in a sunny pool or inlet of the sea, and even sport with his fellows when swimming. For all his aquatic habits, however, he spends a great deal of his time above ground. Old sportsmen discovered this when at dawn they followed his "trail"—the true history of his nightly ramblings, which disappears with the dew upon which it is recorded. He wanders many miles in the course of a summer night, but, like the badger, he knows his limitations and the danger of being surprised too far from home. There always comes the time, of course, when some tempting brook or runnel leads him farther afield than prudence would have him venture, in which case he makes the best of it, and kennels in the most comfortable place that he can find.

Some years ago, a farmer living on the outskirts of the Moor told me that his sheep-dogs had come across and killed a strange animal which had been lying up in a little gorse-brake not far from his house. He had taken the trophy home in triumph, and, asking to see it, I was eventually shown a large otter in splendid condition. There was no stream



near the place where it had been found, only a little wet ditch up which it must have worked its way.

Not long ago, a Dartmoor farmer told me that upon one occasion he met a pair of otters upon the summit of the Belstone Ridge, "humping along like two great ferrets", and quite recently a chauffeur from this village accomplished a performance which is, perhaps, unique. Driving home late one night along the lane leading from Taw Green to South Tawton, he was suddenly aware of a little animal crossing immediately in front of him. There was no time to avoid a collision. He felt the inevitable jar, and under the impression, as he admitted, that he had run over a cat, he hurried on to avoid possible differences with the cat's owner. The following morning a postman upon his early round picked up the body of an otter. Its skull had been crushed, but the pelt remained intact, and he was able to sell it for thirty shillings, much to the chagrin of the motorist.

Mr. William Pedler of Baron's Wood, Zeal Monachorum, once had a surprising experience when rabbiting with one companion on the banks of an ornamental pool in his grounds. They were trying a large burrow which their ferret, when introduced, seemed indisposed to enter, but as foxes were known to lie there no importance was attached to the circumstance, and they were not a little amazed when two full-grown otters bolted simultaneously and made for the water. Their presence there was sufficiently remarkable, being unprecedented in the history of the place, but matter for greater surprise was in store, for after swimming once round the

pool, and finding no other refuge, the two strangers deliberately returned to the burrow from which nothing could again eject them.

This is only the second instance within my knowledge of otters bolting from a ferret. Foxes often do so, but in either case I cannot believe that the actual attack of the ferret dislodges the animal. Were the ferret unaccompanied by human beings, neither fox nor otter would look twice at it, unless to snap it up. In all probability, these otters, being in strange quarters, were thoroughly alarmed before the ferret entered the burrow, and when the rabbits began to "bump", they realized that something was amiss and judged it time to vacate.

More remarkable still was a glimpse of otter life obtained by John Bennett when scouring Taw Marsh one morning in quest of the elusive blackcock. He was treading the ling which in those days grew breast-high beside the river, when, much to his amazement, he saw, as he thought, a huge brown snake threading its way along the bank no distance ahead of him. Mystified and scarcely able to believe his eyes, he was "'most afraid" to venture near the strange monster. Screwing up his courage, however, he "creeped round and looked in ovver", and so learned that the ferocious-looking reptile in reality consisted of four otters running along in Indian file close upon one another's heels.

Wild with excitement, never having seen such a thing before, he fired at the rearmost animal, just as the interesting procession was disappearing behind a boulder, and had the satisfaction of seeing it roll over into the water. It proved to be a very old dog,

and this is, perhaps, the strangest part of the story, destroying the natural assumption that the party comprised a female and three cubs. Even that would have been remarkable, by the way, for, according to old authorities, otter cubs are cast upon their own resources very early in life. As it was, the identity of the dead animal rather suggests a love-chase, though it is the only instance of the kind that has occurred within my knowledge.

There is a big otter stronghold near the scene of the incident just related, where cubs are sometimes reared. It is under an old mountain-ash, opening on to a deep pool which for many seasons has been the haunt of an old cannibal trout of fabulous size and cunning. Almost every angler for miles round has tried his hand at him, while others have not scrupled to resort to less-legitimate methods, in the endeavour to circumvent the speckled patriarch. On one occasion several youths from the neighbouring village of Belstone went so far as to strip, invade the pool, and try to "tickle" him out, but the hovers where the old fish lurks proved too deep for bare arms. Most shameless, perhaps, were the efforts of an old village poacher who, in his own words, "throwed bread and cheese on the water ever so many times and bided handy to shoot un when he comed up". The trout, however, was not to be tempted even by such sumptuous fare.

As a general rule I am inclined to think that trout suffer less from an otter's ravages than salmon. They are nimble fish, wise in their generation, and I have noticed that when an otter takes up his abode in any particular locality, trout frequently shift

their quarters. With salmon, it is a different matter. Though few anglers may believe it, this fish is probably the most heavy-witted of his order, and if report speaks truly, the old salmon-spearers of the Teign and the Dart found him an easy prey. He is, they say, a sort of aquatic ostrich. Once started, he dashes away like a flash, and one naturally supposes that he will repeat the performance if followed up. Nothing of the sort, however. All he does is to plunge blindly into the first hover, thrust his head as far as possible under the bank, and there remain, believing himself hidden. The spearman had only to "mark him in" and strike at leisure, and it seems only reasonable to suppose that an otter's task is proportionately easy.

Little appears to be known of an otter's actual manner of fishing. One is so inclined to associate him with the water that it is easy to forget that he is really a weasel, adopting precisely the same methods as those employed by his faster-footed relatives; and though subsisting mainly upon aquatic life, in all probability he seldom seeks his prey in the lower deeps after the manner of a pike, and anyone who takes the trouble to study his highways and byways will discover that he has many cunningly concealed lurking-places amongst the river-side vegetation or under overhanging banks, where he can see without being seen, and, presumably, watch for the rising fish and mark its retreat.

It is generally recognized that the daintiest flowers grow out of the dirt, therefore there is nothing surprising in the fact that the otter—sleek and graceful creature that he is—like the gorgeous kingfisher, is

reared and lives in surroundings that leave much to be desired. Like all members of the great *Mustela* family, with the possible exception of the badger, he is in the habit of storing provisions against a future scarcity, and as his dwelling also does duty as a store-house, the effect at times is far from pleasant. Moreover, he shares with his kindred species the reprehensible habit—or so fishermen consider—of killing a great deal more than he can eat, and when, as sometimes happens during a period of drought, he finds a number of fish marooned in shallow pools, he does not scruple to make full use of the opportunity.

In otter-hunting, perhaps more than in any other sport, the seemingly inconsistent truism “the more killed the more found” holds good. In old days, when countries were not hunted to half the present extent, and only a proportionate number of animals were killed, otters, it would seem, were scarcely more plentiful than now. Even Buffon speaks of them as “not very numerous”. They must have been more plentiful as a logical sequence, but more were not found. It was the same old story. A river would be good for a certain number, which might be killed, leaving, as far as could be judged, not another upon the entire length of water, yet a few months later the same stream would yield as many more, and so it is to-day. The modern hunter, arriving with his pack by car or rail, finds precisely the same number of otters as his representative of half a century ago with his tuneful “shaggies” found in the same historic holts after hacking many miles to get there. The fact that more are killed

nowadays makes no perceptible difference to the stock. This may not apply in every case or in every country, but it holds good as a general rule.

The explanation is simple. Otters, like kingfishers, appear to respect riparian rights, and each animal takes up its abode upon some particular stretch of water, nor will another be found as a rule within several miles. When one is killed, another takes the vacant fishing, and here some interesting questions arise. From whence comes the fresh supply? How do the animals know when there is room for them? Are they in very truth new-comers, or does the solution of the problem lie in the simple fact that there are a great many more otters upon any river than hounds ever get wind of? Everybody knows how frequently a spaniel will pass a rabbit, and when one remembers the kind of place in which an otter lurks, particularly on rocky moorland streams, the only wonder lies in the fact that he is ever found at all.

•

## CHAPTER VII

### DARTMOOR FAUNA

#### THE SMALLER ANIMALS

TRADITION, not unaided by fiction, has peopled the Dartmoor of old romance with many savage beasts that may or may not have roamed its solitudes. Burt enumerates the wolf, the winged serpent, long-eared snake, horseshoe snake, the bear, the fox, the boar, the marten, the fitchet, the badger, the otter, the but, wild white cattle, goat, hare, lynx and deer, quoting an old charter "whereby leave was given to the clergy and laity of Devon to take capreolum, the goat; vulpam, the fox; catum, the marten or wild cat; lupum, the wolf; leporem, the hare; lutram, the otter; out of the bounds of the forest". This constitutes a formidable list, and one can readily believe that the forest animals at one time indeed terrorized the surrounding villages. It is more than probable, however, that undue significance has been attached to names which bear at best a far-fetched resemblance to those of animals supposed at some remote period to have haunted the locality. If every name suggesting a Natural History derivation bore distinct connection with the past or present fauna of the district, the official

range of many animals would require considerable extension.

Whether Buttern Hill derives its nomenclature from the curious species mentioned above—possibly a member of the goat tribe unknown to modern naturalists—is a question that I prefer to leave to the learned. It seems scarcely probable, however, that country so devoid of timber as Dartmoor must have been—at least since the beginning of English History—can ever have harboured the tree-loving lynx, although the curious name of Links Tor admittedly suggests association with the great grey cat of Northern Europe. On the other hand, while the wolf still haunted the forest as recently as during the reign of Elizabeth, no name of hill or stream directly commemorates his presence, and mere coincidence would seem to be responsible for one or two obvious misnomers or corruptions. In the respective cases of Hare Tor, Woodcock Hill, Fox Tor, Raven Tor and Fur Tor the connection is both obvious and appropriate, the first four not only standing for wild creatures representative of Dartmoor fauna to-day, but giving the name to localities where these creatures are probably found in the greatest abundance.

Like most animals that have become more or less dependent upon cultivation for existence, the brown hare is more abundant upon outlying tracts of moorlands than in the heart of the Forest. High altitudes for the most part represent the final refuge rather than the chosen home of this animal. Unlike the blue variety, she is not content to subsist upon the tender heather-tips, and even during summer she



comes down from the hills as evening falls to nibble the meadow-grass or the fresh green of the spring corn. Severe weather, if prolonged, always brings her down, particularly deep snow, to which all outlying creatures have a strong aversion, although after feeding upon the lowlands she usually returns by day to her form somewhere upon the near hills.

An old Indian legend describes the manner in which the hare of the New World obtained her white winter coat as a protection against her arch-enemy—the shadowy lynx of the brushwood. It would seem, however, that the good Clote Scarpe, or his European representative, has been equally kind to the timid animal of our own moorlands.

Upon the bleak granite hills, where the dominant hue of the landscape is bronze or grey, the hare is dressed accordingly, wearing a greyish-brown coat in perfect harmony with the scattered boulders and wind-bleached herbage. Nature, indeed, owed her this measure of protection, for so many are her enemies, comprising practically every preying animal from the rapacious bird to the boy with his “angle-bow”, and so subject to mortality from other natural causes are the young that one can but wonder how she ever contrives to hold her own under conditions so unfavourable. The hare is, perhaps, the most delicate of living things, seldom recovering from a wound or any severe shock, of which a pathetic instance recently came to my knowledge.

A party of village youths, walking one Sunday afternoon along the slopes of Cosdon Beacon—the “wet mountain” which overlooks all the northern panorama of Dartmoor Forest—by ill fortune stum-

bled upon a litter of leverets numbering four, lodged in the heather on the lee side of a boulder. The little creatures, being very young, were allowed to remain, but the temptation to ear-mark them for future identification proved irresistible—and in every case fatal, all four being found dead in the form a few days later.

I have a theory that young and timid animals frequently die from the effects of being man-handled, no matter how gently, the terror of the experience proving too much for them. When rabbit-shooting with ferrets not long ago, I had occasion to pick up a tiny "squeaker", which bolted from the burrow that we were trying, and, thinking only to save the little creature's life, I consigned him to an empty ferret-bag, intending to restore him to the burrow when it was safe to do so. As it happened, some considerable time elapsed before we recovered the ferrets, and upon opening the bag to release the little prisoner, I found him already stiff and cold. He had sustained no injury; suffocation was out of the question; and to fright alone could his death be attributed. It is commonly supposed that a hard-run hare, even if she escapes, rarely survives the experience, in which connection a curious coursing incident, possibly unique, was once described to me by a man who witnessed it. An unusually close race between two favourite greyhounds and a spry little jack-hare ended in the quarry literally dropping dead from sheer exhaustion. But, incredible as it well may seem, the hounds, then about half a dozen good jumps behind her, were themselves so completely run up that neither of them could, or did, reach the hare.

A popular notion prevails that dry cold hurts nothing, and that wet seasons work the greater havoc with wild life. As a matter of fact, a "green winter" in the ordinary course of events means abundant food, and usually a season of prosperity for graminivorous creatures, whereas prolonged or severe cold involves inevitable famine and a high rate of mortality. Upon high moorlands more than anywhere else the scarcity or abundance of hares depends largely upon weather-cycles, a series of mild winters proving more helpful as a rule in restoring the stock than any other factor. Given tolerably favourable conditions, the remarkable fecundity of the hare usually enables the species to hold its own despite the many difficulties with which it has to contend. As a somewhat remarkable example of this, a pair of hares once kept in a large enclosure were responsible for an offspring of no fewer than sixty-eight within the space of a year. Incidentally, a pair of rabbits, confined for the same period, produced three hundred.

One is inclined to wonder how the idea that hares produce no more than two leverets at a time ever obtained such wide credence. A litter may include almost as many as that of a rabbit. A naturalist writing to me the other day mentioned having found a nest containing six leverets, all of which bore a white streak between, and at right angles to, the ears. He also told me that the country-folk in his locality held the belief that when a hare's litter consisted of more than four, the white streak was always present. In the opinion of some observers, a hare will divide a large litter, after the manner of a

fox, but this is a somewhat difficult point to establish. The theory is also somewhat weakened by the fact that the motive in a hare's case is not so apparent as with a vixen, since leverets are not dependent upon the parent's exertions for their entire food supply, the weaker members of a litter being as well able as any to nibble for themselves.

The brown hare is, in many respects, an animal of whom a somewhat exaggerated picture has been drawn, and many curious ideas concerning its history are still current among the country-people. How frequently, for example, one comes across the quaint notion, that she—a hare's gender is always feminine—can run faster uphill than down, which is an obvious impossibility by all the laws of gravitation. As usual in such cases, the idea is not without a substratum of truth. Thanks to the peculiar formation of her hind legs, a hare is a better climber than the majority of her pursuers, and so gains ground when mounting a steep gradient. No animal climbs for choice, however, and when exhausted from long running, like all hunted creatures, with the possible exception of the bear, she steers a downhill course.

Again there is the widespread belief, entertained even by many sportsmen, that hares and rabbits cannot inhabit the same districts. "When rabbits come, hares go" is the saying, and supporters of the theory go so far as to affirm that the rabbit, erroneously supposed to be the more pugnacious of the two, "drives" its larger relative. The latter notion is sheer nonsense. None the less there can be no denying that at times a notable increase of

rabbits coincides with a total disappearance of hares. This is admittedly curious, though the dual occurrence is usually due to changing conditions, perhaps a new system of farming, or some form of agricultural development such as draining or reclaiming of ground, involving a material change in the character of the land itself, and consequently the disappearance of certain food plants upon which the hares depended. Or, more likely still, the influx of rabbits inevitably brings the trapper, against whose wholesale methods the hare stands no chance. Hares, it must be remembered, are very easily exterminated. Also, like certain game-birds, they come and go, sometimes forsaking a once favourite locality for long periods of years without apparent reason. While rejecting the theory as a whole, therefore, one must admit the smattering of truth that it contains, nor can one deny that in certain cases it appears to hold good, and in this connection some interesting points arise. Were hares and rabbits *never* found together, one might dismiss the whole question by merely asserting that their requirements are different—a simple and obvious explanation. On the contrary, however, I could mention numberless localities where both animals are exceedingly numerous, and have been so as long as anyone can remember, a circumstance that disposes of the idea that the two species cannot exist amicably together, or the much more plausible theory that hares dislike rabbit-tainted ground. Then why, one wonders, does the rule apply in some cases and not in others ?

Hares, it should be remarked, can live at higher altitudes than rabbits, or in districts where the latter

would starve, being able to travel longer distances in search of food. On the other hand, they are strangely local in their habits, adhering rigidly to certain prescribed tracts of country. Without exaggeration, they may be plentiful upon one side of a road or valley and practically unheard-of on the other. I have in mind more than one such boundary line that was so strictly observed that during many consecutive seasons even hunted hares were never known to cross it, although the nature of the land upon either side appeared to be identical. It frequently happens in such cases, however, that after a lapse of years the veto upon the banned district appears to be withdrawn. Hares occupy it, and become as plentiful there as anywhere else.

They are, in truth, exceedingly conservative animals, and in this circumstance there probably lies the real secret of the riddle. They adhere most rigidly to the immediate locality in which they are born, and if it happens that through mischance neighbouring districts have become depopulated, they remain so for the simple reason that no hares care to abandon their own overcrowded haunt to take possession of the vacant country. Soon or late, perhaps, an odd pair for reasons of their own seek "pastures new", and so a fresh stock becomes established upon ground that had long been forsaken. In my opinion, the presence or absence of rabbits is purely coincidental, except in such cases where reasons for the predominance of one species or other are sufficiently obvious.

Hares cover enormous distances when the rutting season first commences, namely during late

February and March. Why they behave so strangely at this period of the year above all others, since the actual mating-time extends over early summer, is known only to themselves. The proverbial madness at any rate has its foundation in Natural History, for they play strange pranks during the festal months, and the age-old tales of their merry-makings by starlight on meadow lawns or snow-swept plateaux are not entirely fictitious. I have seen as many as a dozen hares gambolling together in the April twilight in a little field of young grass not far from the moorland, and very little imagination would be required to supply the element of romance or fantasy with which the folk-lore of many lands has invested their doings.

Generally speaking, Dartmoor does not offer an ideal habitat for the rabbit. In many districts the soil is too peaty for him, and one might mention extensive areas where scarcely a specimen can be found. He is tolerably abundant in most of the rocky valleys and clitters, however, though rabbits, like hares, prefer the vicinity of cultivated lands whenever possible. They are always most plentiful in districts where gorse predominates, partly, no doubt, on account of the soil upon which this plant flourishes, while the additional shelter and protection that it affords is beneficial in every way to the rabbit's requirements. There is no cover like gorse for any animal that appreciates warmth and dry conditions, and heavy indeed must be the rain that saturates the earth under a really thick brake. At one time a great many of the rough furzy intakes bordering upon the Moor were given over to the

breeding of rabbits. Warrenning indeed was quite an industry among the hill-farmers. This has more or less lapsed within recent years, though it is still carried on to some extent. For the most part, however, the dilapidated wire enclosures only remain as evidence of the purposes which the now practically useless fields once served.

Though warrenning is no longer so general a custom around the Moor, rabbits as often as not still constitute the hill-farmer's most profitable crop. I know of one man in this locality who for many years paid his rent of £200 per annum, entirely at the expense of the long-eared population. Conventionally, this might be considered disgraceful farming, but here, as ever, there are two sides to the question, and prejudice frequently plays a large part in the condemnation of such methods. Apart from the fences, which they certainly destroy, rabbits do not materially damage the land, as would a heavy stock of cattle, horses, or even poultry. They "sour" it for the time being, indeed—but not more so than anything else, and, if wired off from the growing crops, make no difference to the main produce of the farm. The man in question has always grown the best wheat and root crops in the locality, while the land upon which the rabbits are mainly reared is of little value for other purposes. The raising of poultry upon an extensive scale is always regarded as an industry of national importance, yet rabbits provide an equally abundant and far less expensive supply of animal food. The method most profitable to the farmer in the long run, moreover, frequently proves the most beneficial to the



nation as a whole. One would not advocate the conversion of useful land into rabbit-warrens. At the same time, ground that can only be cultivated at a loss and is valueless as pasturage might as well grow the one natural crop that it is capable of bearing. All considered, legislation that aims at the extermination of the rabbit as a menace to agriculture is best calculated to penalize the very class for whose benefit it is intended.

The distribution of the rabbit upon Dartmoor being restricted to certain areas, that of the animals whose principal prey it constitutes is limited also. The grim polecat is now virtually a thing of the past, or at best, he is making positively his last stand against adverse conditions that have proved too many for him. But wherever the rabbit is abundant his sinister little shadow, the stoat, is still no stranger, and latterly these fierce little hunters have become more numerous than ever among the stone walls and clitters upon the outskirts of the moorland.

One is frequently asked to define the difference between a stoat and a weasel, even by people whose entire lives have been spent in the country. This, however, is not altogether surprising, for neither animal lends itself readily to observation. None the less, the actual difference between the two little creatures is sufficiently pronounced to be noticeable at a glance.

In the first place, the great disparity in size should obviate any possibility of mistake. A full-grown stoat measures about fourteen inches from nose to tail-tip. A weasel rarely exceeds ten inches. The

head of the stoat is broader in proportion to its length, while the tail is longer, more bushy, and tipped with black, to which jetty tag there are occasionally attached a few white hairs at the extreme tip. A weasel's tail is the same colour as the rest of its fur, and is too short, almost, to whisk, its entire length being little more than two inches. The smaller animal is further distinguished by a brownish spot on each jaw beneath the corners of the mouth.

Elusive as they are, either animal is capable of astonishing boldness at times. Not long ago, I witnessed a typical example of this in the case of a stoat. The savage little creature, a female, had just killed a rabbit, whose death cry, indeed, brought me to the spot. All was over before my arrival, however, and she was dragging the body across an open space towards the river-bank, where, deep among boulders and gorse-bushes, was lodged her crew of young garotters. The strength displayed by the little beast was astonishing. None the less, her progress was necessarily slow, the rabbit being many times her own weight, and so intent was she upon her task that she allowed me to approach within a few yards of her before darting away with a viperish hiss and "chicker" of protest. Mindful of former experiences, I stood still, and, sure enough, before long she reappeared. There was a twinkle of white on the river-bank as her spotless little shirt-front caught the sunlight, a russet streak through the long grass, and the dead rabbit resumed its journey riverwards. A renewed advance upon my part again put her to flight, but this time she re-

treated even more unwillingly, returning sooner to the attack, and so it went on until she had dragged her rabbit into the tangle that screened the bank, where, still protesting, she rustled out of sight among the rocks.

Men at work near rocks or brakes during summer secure a considerable number of rabbits by the simple process of robbing a hunting "stottie", to give it its local name. A furze-cutter has told me that upon one occasion he took five well-grown rabbits from a stoat within half an hour, and would have got more had not the indefatigable little huntress happened to kill the sixth in the heart of a black-thorn thicket, from which she escaped with her booty unobserved. It must not be supposed that under ordinary circumstances her bag would have reached such a sanguinary total. If so, not a rabbit would be left alive upon the hills. Left to herself, the first kill would doubtless have sufficed her, but, being robbed of one victim after another, both appetite and temper were whetted accordingly, for nothing exasperates a stoat more than the loss of its kill.

The ferocious little beast is indeed curiously tenacious of its own property. One afternoon, accompanied by my wife and a friend, I was studying the bird-life on a cliff that overhung an artificial pool, formed by the flooded shaft of an old mine. Noticing that my retriever evinced more than a casual interest in an overgrown stone heap close beside the water, my suspicions were aroused, for both stoats and weasels are particularly fond of rocky localities. Inspection of the place soon revealed a stoat's larder, stocked with so many gruesome but interesting little

curios, from the remains of insects to kestrel's eggs—the latter obviously purloined from an eyrie on the cliff—that we decided to attempt a photograph of the larder and its contents. This, however, proved a difficult and lengthy proceeding, owing to the steepness of the bank and the close proximity of deep water, and an interval for tea was proposed before the picture had been obtained. The meal was taken within a few yards of the bank, after which we returned to the assault, only to find to our considerable surprise and chagrin that the most interesting relics, including the complete skeleton of a frog which had looked quite impressive on the ground-glass, had been removed during the interval by their lawful owner, who apparently prized this particular specimen above the motley collection of snail-shells, woodpigeons' eggs and detached fragments of bone and fur which comprised the bulk of his collection. However that may have been, the effrontery of the little beast seemed scarcely credible.

Neither stoat nor weasel ever relinquishes its kill without protest. One afternoon, when out on the hills, I was considerably mystified by a piping, bird-like note which for the moment I could not identify, though it seemed remotely familiar. It seemed to proceed from a patch of bracken ahead of me into which my retriever—the same dog of the preceding incident—had just rushed headlong. It struck me as curious that any bird should remain there under the circumstances; the cry, or cries—for it now sounded from several quarters—continued, however, and not until the dog emerged with a freshly killed rabbit in his jaws did the true explanation of the

mysterious notes occur to me. One glance at the rabbit sufficed to reveal the manner of its death, and in the same instant I remembered the previous occasion upon which I had heard similar cries when one summer night I chanced upon a family of stoats taking an airing, the parents adopting the same mode of expressing their resentment.

The dog, meanwhile, having delivered the rabbit, rushed back into the brake, presumably to continue the argument. The stoats, however, had withdrawn discreetly, the birdlike notes gradually receding in the direction of an old stone wall which divides the moorland from a disused warren. It might be interesting to remark that this episode occurred in Belstone Cleave, the scene of a somewhat similar incident described in *Tarka, the Otter*. One can only assume that it was a case of a stoat family hunting in company, which is, in my opinion, the explanation of the numerous stories that one reads of pack-hunting on the part of these animals. When the young reach maturity, they disperse like all other hunting animals, with the exception of the dog tribe. Apart from one or two isolated instances during the breeding-season, I have never seen a stoat or a weasel pursuing his deadly craft other than single-handed, his individual efforts being all too efficient to require any help from others of his kind.

One is inclined to smile at the numerous tales of these animals going to the extreme length of attacking human beings. Such instances have undoubtedly occurred, however, when a human intruder, by chance or design, has approached the young of either species. Old stoats have come very

near me at times with their grating, menacing hiss, and I can vouch for the courage and ferocity of one diminutive weasel who ran at a proffered stick again and again, striking it with a force at least sufficient to jar the arm that held it. The same weasel drew attention to itself upon this occasion by the fact that it was keeping a large spaniel at bay, the dog recoiling from it as he would have done from a snake. Minute as they are, they frequently intimidate dogs who as often as not let them slip at close quarters. I saw this happen in a lane not long ago, when a stoat suddenly appeared upon one of the banks in front of the dog that was accompanying me. The moment it caught sight of the dog it began to screech venomously, but persisted in its intention of crossing the lane, and although the dog's jaws appeared to close upon the little virago once or twice, the fatal nip was never administered, the stoat making good its escape into the rabbit-hole for which it had been making.

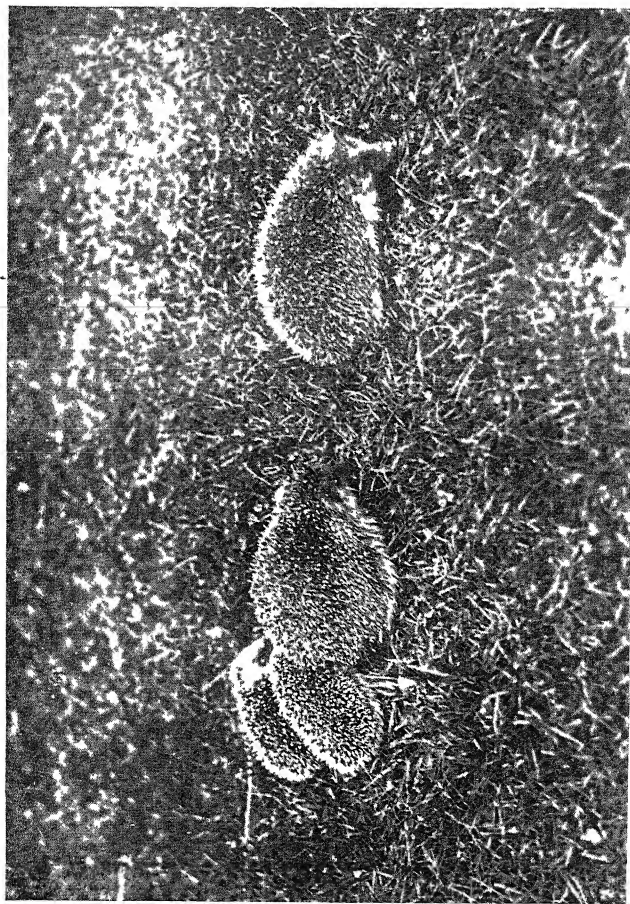
A polecat, possibly the last of its race so far as Devon is concerned, was trapped near Spreyton a year or two ago. Such a thing had not been seen within many miles of the place for a quarter of a century, and one can only wonder how it got there. Was it looking for its vanished kindred? If so it went the same way.

The more one considers the matter, the more remarkable it seems that any representatives of the once abundant *Mustelidæ* survive the wholesale campaign waged against the race by the rabbit-trapper. The weasel is in a somewhat better case than his larger relatives, since he preys upon smaller "deer",

such as mice and moles, which latter he pursues underground with characteristic ferocity. One frequently hears mole-catchers talk of the "vairies" that find their way into the "snaps", and I have myself seen the brown furry little forms fast between the iron nippers. But moletraps are comparatively few, and for the most part the underground system offers safe travelling to all creatures that can avail themselves of its amenities. The rabbit thoroughfares which the stoat mainly follows, like the polecat before him, constitute a very different problem, however, as the little wild creatures of the moorland and hedgerow find to their cost. It might give some idea of the trapper's comprehensive bag to include a list of the total claimed by a farmer in this neighbourhood who does a certain amount for himself and one or two neighbours.

Rabbits	.	.	.	.	.	7,000
Stoats	.	.	.	.	.	35
Rats	.	.	.	.	.	127
Cats	.	.	.	.	.	22
Hedgehogs	.	.	.	.	.	30
Badgers	.	.	.	.	.	1
Foxes	.	.	.	.	.	1

And last but not least—surely a record in the history of trapping—one black Angus bull! The latter, it might be as well to explain, was caught by his nose-ring, and the task of extricating him can be better imagined than described.



A FAMILY PARTY FATHER HEADS THE PROCESSION

*From a photograph by Richard Rason*





## CHAPTER VIII

### BADGERS AND OTHER THINGS

IF ancient accounts are at all reliable, badgers were practically unknown upon the Devonshire highlands a hundred years ago. Such statements, however, can apply only to the high tors and the upland bogs, for it is sufficiently clear that "grayes" were always numerous in the deep-wooded coombes which mark the course of the Dartmoor rivers to the lowlands, and upon the outlying hillsides which can best be described, perhaps, as the foundations of the Moor. Even so, their alleged absence from the higher levels is sufficiently remarkable, the badger being almost as confirmed an inhabitant of the mountainous cairns and clitters as he is a lover of sandy coombes and acclivities, which latter afford unfettered scope for his unrivalled powers as an excavator. It must be remembered that his presence among the rocky fastnesses of the hills, where natural strongholds obviate the necessity for deep burrowing, is never so noticeable, since there are no conspicuous earthworks to betray his presence, and it is more than probable that he inhabited a great many lonely tors and clitters without a soul being the wiser. However that may have been, the badger, like the hedgehog, is now no stranger to the wildest and most remote

parts of the Forest, where he subsists mainly upon roots, grubs, whortleberries, and small mammals and reptiles, leaving little more than his unmistakable "handwriting" in the peat to record the long erratic tale of his nightly wanderings.

Speaking for the West Country generally, the badger is certainly extending his range. "He may yet win in the race of life with his more numerous and protected neighbour, the fox," wrote W. H. Hudson, and it is, after all, only true to life that this stolid, sturdy, friendless beast should hold his own under conditions that have proved too hard for so many of his more gifted fellow-creatures. One cannot but admire the badger and the long unequal fight for existence which he has so successfully maintained all down the centuries. There is something pre-eminently British about him, with his independence, courage and very tenacity. And apart from any such sentiment, he has yet another claim to consideration upon purely historical grounds, for, according to Professor Owen, he is "the oldest-known species of mammal now living on the face of the earth". Unfortunately, however, the average Englishman cares for none of these things, and it is well for the badger that he is in no way dependent upon human protection.

In bygone days, as recorded in old parish registers, small bounties were paid by the community for the destruction of certain animals. One shilling was the price set upon a badger's life in Devonshire, and the sum represented a day's hard labour in those times. It is fortunate, perhaps, that bounties upon a corresponding scale are not offered at the present day,

the modern West Countryman requiring too little incentive to persecute the wild creatures of the countryside.

The tendency is to represent the badger as a clumsy-witted creature, whereas our friend, the fox, justly famous for his fleetness of foot, is also reputed to be a past-master of subtlety and *finesse*. That the badger should have acquired this reputation is only natural, but it is scarcely fair to compare him with his more nimble contemporary, the structure and habits of the two animals being so widely different. One might as reasonably draw comparisons between an otter and a cat. It should be remembered, moreover, that the badger is usually seen at a disadvantage, being exhibited by day under conditions entirely foreign to his nature. While the fox is largely diurnal in his habits, the badger is wholly and exclusively a creature of the night. He is not even like the bats and the owls, who prefer twilight to total darkness. Black night, or the closest approach to it, he must have, and so remains in the gloom of his own burrow until long after the stars are bright. When compelled to show himself in the broad glare of noonday, his movements appear heavy and awkward, simply because everything is strange to him.

Cunning and agility are not the qualities by means of which the badger has so long held his own. His powers are rather displayed in the wonderful fortresses that he has constructed for himself on the steep hillsides, where the massive earthworks testify to his labours, and it is a strange reflection that in many cases those same deep burrows, or "settes"

as they are called, were actually constructed many centuries ago, and that the badgers who first burrowed there may have witnessed the erection of the stone circles, or pricked their ears at the glare of the primeval camp-fires. The ancient dwellers of the moorlands have passed away, leaving even their history unrecorded, yet the strongholds of the badger entrenched deep in the very heart of the soil, remain impregnable to this day, and there are innumerable places where his human enemies, though aided by every modern contrivance, still assail him in vain.

Every detail concerning the history and life of so old an inhabitant should be common knowledge. Our forefathers, one would have thought, must have known him well enough—too well in some respects, since he was the principal prize-fighter of the “good old times”. Yet, strange to say, old accounts of the badger as a general rule contain little more than a few commonplace remarks, stock anecdotes—singularly unbadger-like—some stereotyped quotations from Buffon, together with comments upon the then prevailing “sport” of badger-baiting. Compared with one another, most of these descriptions read almost word for word, and though appearing under many different names, in no way suggest anything approaching original research or observation.

Now, in these enlightened times, can we with justice claim an appreciably wider knowledge than William Osbaldiston displayed when writing his quaint treatise on the *Noble Art of Venery*, as pursued towards the close of the eighteenth century, or the compiler of the *Sportsman's Encyclopædia*, published

for the instruction of those who studied woodcraft fifty years later? Modern Nature-writers, for the most part, can tell us little more than that the badger is a representative of the weasel family; that he is a burrowing and a hibernating animal; that he is fond of wasp-grubs, but, being unable to subsist exclusively upon this commodity owing to the limited supply, he may be considered tolerably omnivorous in his diet. Even upon the latter point they appear to be uncertain, as evinced by the interminable discussions as to whether the creature is or is not addicted to raiding hen-roosts, committing murderous assaults upon mountain lambs, munching up game-chicks, and perpetrating the many atrocities not permissible to law-abiding denizens of the rocks and coombes. In a word the badger, like most truly wild creatures, has been reluctant to divulge his entire life story. Circumstances have compelled him to reveal its bare outline, but, like the stolid Devonian who sold the original copy of *Widcombe Fair* to Mr. Baring Gould, but took care to "keep some o' the best verses for hisself", so the badger has contrived to reserve many interesting secrets concerning the details of his inner life.

In Nature study, perhaps, the greatest difficulty lies in determining the exact point at which fact ends and fiction begins, or in tracing the origin of the many purely fictitious notions that somehow get afoot. Accident has probably been responsible for the most of them; some anecdote exaggerated or incorrectly explained. Mistakes, again, so easily occur, while in these days pure invention is too frequently called upon to supply the lack of first-

hand experience. Mr. Herbert Ponting in his book *The Great White South*, gives an illuminating account of the manner in which a sea-animal story, extorted from him by a Sydney reporter, was embellished beyond recognition, and I remember a naïve request made to me by a newspaper correspondent by whom I was accosted when stepping off a Canadian Pacific transcontinental express at Winnipeg. The man wished to know whether anything of outstanding interest had occurred upon the journey, and, receiving a reply in the negative, he demanded with characteristic western brevity whether I could not oblige him with some glaring untruth for the occasion, since he was out to procure unique copy by fair means or foul.

It is not difficult to believe that the "professional naturalist", commissioned to provide a daily or weekly article, must now and again find himself in a position similar to that of the reporters mentioned, and this thought inevitably crossed my mind when, not long ago, I was assailed in the hunting-field by an acquaintance who opened fire with a startling question: "Is it true that a fox invariably emerges from its earth backwards?" My reply to the effect that a fox might do so when—and only when—someone was drawing it out by the brush did not appear to satisfy the interrogator. It transpired that he had just been reading an article containing that assertion, and though it is possible that the writer had good reason for making such an announcement, one would like to know how the idea originated. There can be little doubt that many utterly erroneous, but frequently accepted, impressions are based

upon foundations as unsubstantial. A circumstance inaccurately observed or accounted for, a statement repeated with a little embellishment, a measure of credulity upon the part of readers or listeners, and a theory springs into being which all the accumulated knowledge of the scientist is powerless to refute.

It is indeed nearly impossible to explode any notion, however fantastic, concerning wild creatures. Even the ancient and, one may venture to say, absurd question as to whether the hedgehog does or does not suck cows has been revived, and its pros and cons debated in prominent journals. All the stock arguments, both for prosecution and defence, have been brought into play, the inevitable "authentic instances" given and discredited, the sceptic pointing out that the unfortunate little beast is physically incapable of doing anything of the kind. They argue about the sharpness of its spines and teeth, which any self-respecting cow might reasonably be expected to resent, or the insufficient size of its mouth for such a purpose, which latter, incidentally, is a somewhat weak contention, as anyone can testify who has seen the width of a hedgehog's gape when bisecting a large black slug. Curiously enough, however, one simple and conclusive argument does not seem to have occurred to the disputants. The hedgehog, after all, is an exceedingly small animal. He can drink at most a teacupful of milk, as anyone who has kept tame specimens knows, and, even admitting that the cow permitted the liberty, the amount consumed would be too negligible to be missed. In the given instances of cows sucked dry, the culprit for this reason must be a much larger



animal—probably some other member of the herd. The normal cow gives enough milk to drown several hedgehogs.

Authenticated instances of the seemingly impossible are constantly cropping up in Natural History to confound the scientist—who, as a rule, wisely assumes his armour of severe and impenetrable incredulity—and secretly to puzzle the less distinguished but equally accurate observer. There are people who appear to specialize in remarkable experiences, even as there are undeniably good card-holders, or people who possess a positively uncanny knack of “drawing a winner”. These are perhaps the most difficult to “catch out”, since as a rule they possess the art of making a great deal out of nothing. Then we have the habitual yarn-spinner, who allows his imagination so free a range that in course of time he almost comes to believe his own stories, and is unable to refrain from romancing even in the course of ordinary conversation. One is reminded of Longfellow’s Iagoo, than whom

None had made so many journeys,  
None had seen so many wonders.

And, though this type of person is seldom taken very seriously in everyday life, he is apt to work considerable mischief if he happens to specialize in Natural History observation.

Again there is the sensationalist, who finds the mid-winter bird’s nest, or hears the early cuckoo. He has an incurable trick of “seeing things”. He is genuine enough—to the best of his own belief—his faults being merely overkeenness and an excessive

optimism which frequently causes him to mistake the commonplace for the unique. His case is a trifle difficult. If encouraged, his frequent discoveries become wearisome, while on the other hand polite incredulity is not always easily expressed. I once heard an old West-Country farmer describing a recent alleged experience to a crony. It concerned a fox, which, if I remember correctly, had been chased round a thick gorse-brake by the farmer's terrier in a somewhat curious manner. He had just reached the most vivid point of the narrative, when the other broke in with the leading question as to who had actually seen the fox. The narrator claiming that distinction, his friend announced with engaging but disconcerting candour : " Then I don't believe a word o' it."

So downright a manner of repudiating questionable statements is scarcely customary in polite conversation. However incredulous the tale, one makes some non-committal remark, and the narrator passes on to repeat his story elsewhere. There are times, however, when the position becomes a trifle embarrassing. A year or two ago I was requested by a neighbour to come and view a marvellous viper, four feet in length, which he had just dispatched, being, of course, immensely proud of the achievement. Accompanied by a friend I went, not without misgivings, to inspect the prodigy. It was suspended full-length from a beam in an out-house, while the man who had killed it—the hero of the hour—stood telling the tale of his prowess to an awestricken audience of village people who were studying the reptile from a respectful distance as,

kept in motion by frequent tentative pokes from a stick, it pivoted slowly upon its string, its bruised, olive-green skin still glossy in the sunlight. It was certainly a remarkable specimen of its kind, but, needless to say, not a viper, and I was at a loss what to say or do when my companion, who, though no naturalist, was at least capable of distinguishing the common objects of the countryside, blurted out: "Surely it's a grass-snake." Soften it as I might, the blow had fallen. Not too heavily, however, for it was a typical case of a man convinced against his will, and I have no doubt that he re-made many converts after our departure.

The man concerned, it should be emphasized, was far from being a novice. On the contrary, he had literally grown grey in the study of the wild moorland creatures among whom he lived, and whose habits he had closely observed for half a century. One would have accepted a statement from him upon any question of woodcraft or Natural History without reserve. The instance, however, proved him as capable of glaring error as the merest greenhorn, and the case is only one of many that have occurred within my experience, the mistake in every case being made in perfect good faith. *Humanum est errare*; and in view of this unchallengeable aphorism, a measure of caution in accepting any statement is not so much advisable as imperatively necessary.

Purely fictitious tales more often than not defeat their own ends by their obvious absurdity, and one cannot but suspect that many of the old anecdotes recorded by early writers must have originated in

the imaginative brain of some wag, whose sole idea at the moment was to "get a rise" out of his listeners. Lately, I came across a hedgehog story, proceeding from no less distinguished a pen than that of the naturalist Jesse. One does not question his veracity, but in this instance one has misgivings as to the reliability of his informant. Here is the passage, *verbatim* :

During the summer of 1818, as Mr. Lane, gamekeeper to the Earl of Galloway, was passing by the wood of Glascaden, near Garlieston, in Scotland, he fell in with a hedgehog, crossing the road at a small distance before him, carrying on its back six pheasant's eggs, which, upon examination, he found it had pilfered from a pheasant's nest hard by. The ingenuity of the creature was very conspicuous, as several of the remaining eggs were holed, which must have been done by it when in the act of rolling itself over the nest, in order to make as many adhere to its prickles as possible. After watching the motions of the urchin for a short time longer, Mr. Lane saw it deliberately crawl into a furze-bush where its nest was, and where the shells of several eggs were strewn around, which had at some former period been conveyed thither in the same manner.

An interesting anecdote, but from a practical point of view utterly impossible, as anyone who has tried to penetrate the shell of a pheasant's egg with a pin cannot fail to be aware. To pierce the shell of any large egg a considerable amount of concentrated and judiciously applied pressure is necessary. This, in the hedgehog's case, would be out of the question. Even if he deliberately rolled upon the clutch, the points of his slender spines would be deflected by the hard polished surface of the eggs. To crush them by dint of his weight would be the utmost that he could achieve, and, even supposing that he could

impale one or two, these would certainly become dislodged in his awkward struggles to regain his feet. The proceeding, however, is inconsistent with the animal's habits, since it makes no store, nor does it carry food to its nest. It feeds as it goes, nor have I ever seen a tame hedgehog attempt to carry off as much as a crumb. Again, the mental process by means of which the creature might be induced to employ its spines for so unnatural a purpose undoubtedly exceeds the plainly defined limitations of the animal mind, which preclude the possibility of any creature deliberately turning parts of its body to other account than their own natural function. The prickly armour of a hedgehog serves its owner for defensive purposes only, and not for attack, or—the same thing in effect—as a means of procuring and conveying supplies. Its jaws would be employed for any such use. One would be exceedingly surprised to see a dog carrying a package under one of its arm-pits instead of in its mouth, which constitutes, I think, a parallel case. The egg story is upon a par with the old notion of a rat sampling the contents of a bottle by the introduction of its long tail—an impracticable proceeding for many obvious reasons—or that of a squirrel deliberately setting forth for a cruise upon a piece of bark with tail erected to serve as sail, although the latter idea rests upon the authority of the solemn Olaus Magnus, whose integrity was beyond question. The most extravagant tales are all vouched for by somebody, and therein lies the difficulty. The hedgehog anecdote, if indeed witnessed, could have been nothing else than the result of some practical joke. That appears to be the one

hope for the worthy gamekeeper's reputation for veracity.

Almost equally unacceptable is the belief still current among many naturalists that the badger, suspecting the presence of traps, deliberately rolls upon them to avoid being caught. In this case, again, there is a substratum of truth to account for the supposition. The badger, like the ratel and others of his family, is exceedingly fond of rolling. It is more than likely that one of his first acts upon emerging from his burrow is to indulge in this special form of recreation, and beyond question he has been known to roll over traps placed in his runways, escaping upon such occasions with no worse consequences to himself than a nasty pinch and a considerable fright. In these cases, however, his good fortune has been due to accident rather than to conscious forethought upon his part. Had he entertained the slightest suspicion of the traps' presence, one cannot believe that the shy creature would deliberately tamper with such deadly contrivances, nor is it quite reasonable to suppose him capable of sufficient acumen to realize that the cruel iron teeth, whose hold upon one of his limbs would prove so inexorable, could obtain no effective grip upon the broad surface of his back. Actually, few animals are more wary of a gin, and few are more skilful at locating its whereabouts. Not long ago, I asked a local trapper who was pursuing his vocation dangerously near the haunts of a badger which I was anxious to preserve, to spare the animal if it had the misfortune to be caught. He replied that I might set my mind at rest upon that score, his

chance of catching it being slight, adding that in the course of thirty years' experience he had seldom found a badger in one of his rabbit gins, though foxes frequently took the fatal step. Incidentally, the one mentioned in the list at the end of the last chapter constituted the sole specimen that the farmer had ever caught.

Despite his reputation for stupidity, the badger is marvellously keen-sensed and wary to the last degree. As a general rule, endless patience and woodcraft of no mean order are required to circumvent him. A gamekeeper once told me that when trapping for badgers he allowed several days to elapse before visiting his gins. When I pointed out the cruelty of such a practice, he pleaded necessity. A badger, he said, is so shy that a human foot-scent, anywhere near his usual haunts, will make him cautious for days, and the only way to ensure success is to keep clear until the animal's suspicions have been allayed.

Trappers adopt such methods too often. Near here a fox was recently found dead in a gin on the edge of a furze-brake. It must have lain there many days, for it had torn up every mouthful of grass within reach, and stripped the very bark off some branches which overhung the place. One trap is not considered strong enough to hold a badger, so two are set close together, the unfortunate animal, if caught in either of them, being pretty sure to tread upon the other in his struggles. Sometimes he sticks his foot into a gin intended for something else, but unless the stake happens to be firmly driven, he soon wrenches it out and makes off, dragging the

whole contrivance with him. Should the trapper find him, his fate is sealed, of course, and as a rule it is better so. To release any animal from a gin is doubtful kindness ; as often as not it dies from after effects, and, at best, suffers considerably. The only alternative goes sadly against the grain, however, and one is always tempted to give the poor creature the benefit of the doubt.

The harmfulness of the badger from the agriculturist's or game-preserver's point of view is a subject too frequently under discussion to be overlooked. It can only be regarded as an open question, depending entirely upon one's way of looking at such things. He is undeniably omnivorous, and if that outweighs the interest that his presence imparts to the countryside, there is nothing further to be said. It is of little use to argue these problems by economics. In any case, no true sportsman should be guilty of unnecessary destruction, nor is the better type of outdoor man likely to forget that there are other considerations as important as the rearing of game-birds or poultry.

It is inevitable that the badger should have many enemies and many accusers, and uncompromising scepticism is dogmatic and unwise. As regards poultry-killing, for example, his guilt in given cases is unquestionable. At the same time, bare justice compels one to point out that such instances, however true, are exceptional, and usually the result of circumstances that do not come to light. If Nature lovers sometimes appear a little stubborn or unduly incredulous, it is because they know that an exception, once admitted, is too liable to be treated as the



rule. There are always people ready enough to accept any excuse for persecuting wild creatures, and in this respect keen fox-hunters are not always quite fair on the badger. When complaints are lodged against the special protégé, the fox, some men are a little too apt to cast the blame upon innocent shoulders. This saves the life of many a fox, for the time being, but it is scarcely "cricket".

Both the badger and the hedgehog are decidedly interesting creatures. Truth is usually more wonderful than fiction, and each of these animals in the course of its ordinary life displays abilities more remarkable than many of the habits erroneously ascribed to it. The badger in particular appears to possess senses entirely unknown to science. I have often remarked upon his amazing dexterity in locating the precise whereabouts of young rabbits ensconced in their nesting-burrows two or three feet below the surface of the ground. Every sportsman knows the difficulty of fixing the precise spot under which some stubborn old rabbit is occupying a ferret's attention, and as often as not a good dog is powerless to render any real assistance, even with subterranean rumblings and bumpings to indicate the place. The badger, however, with no other guide than his own extraordinary nose, experiences no such difficulty. One sniff at the burrow's mouth assures him that it is occupied. He proceeds to find the nearest point from which the nursery can be approached—it may be yards away from the entrance—and, if not too deep, he bores his way straight into it, horizontally or vertically as the case may be. He always appears to know the precise

extent of his own ability. A dog when tunnelling is frequently balked by roots or boulders, and is obliged to abandon the attempt, but I have never yet examined a shaft sunk by a badger which did not bear tragic testimony to the success of the venture. A dog, it should be remarked, can wind rabbits from the burrow's mouth quite as readily as a badger, but he lacks the sense that enables the wild animal to locate their exact whereabouts. He can only adopt the comparatively clumsy and seldom-effective method of following the passage, nor can he wind a rabbit immediately beneath him unless very near the surface. The badger indeed appears to be gifted with faculties which one can only define as "underground senses", and, unlike any other animal, he seems able to exist almost without air. When terriers invade his stronghold, his favourite device is to bury himself by dint of boring yet deeper into the earth and so blocking the passage behind him. This in the case of almost any other animal would amount to an act of suicide. When men inexperienced at the work attempt to dig out a fox, more often than not they only succeed in blocking the hole and losing it altogether in consequence. The fox in such a case never comes out, unless there happens to be another passage communicating with that in which he is entombed. Neither, for that matter, does a rabbit. A comparatively short space of time suffices to suffocate either of these animals. A badger, however, has other resources at his disposal. I have never yet heard of an instance of his death from suffocation, nor, incidentally, of such an accident in the case of a ferret—when underground

—though the latter is not infrequently confined for a long while within the narrowest compass by the body of a rabbit that it has killed, and which effectually blocks the narrow passage. This, one might remark, is the only point upon which the badger appears to display any qualities in common with the other weasels. Apart from structural connecting links, it is difficult to trace any resemblance in habit or deportment between the badger and his supposed relatives, the true weasels. He entirely lacks, for example, their astonishing agility, being, for his size, the slowest beast upon four legs. I once knew a man, neither young nor particularly active, who prided himself upon his ability to out-pace any badger, and upon the occasion of a moonlight hunt, he undertook, for a trifling bet, to pursue and touch with his foot the first badger that took to the open. This he accomplished, chasing an old “boar” across a large pasture, and applying his boot to the animal’s hind quarters just as it reached the fence. In so doing, by the way, he “killed the scent”—to employ the conventional term for one of the most unaccountable things that can happen in hunting—and, spoiling the sport in consequence, made himself generally unpopular.

Another habit of the badger, shared with few others of the weasel family, is that of hibernating, which goes farther than anything to disprove these fiercely carnivorous tendencies of which he is freely accused. No strictly carnivorous animal hibernates, with the exception of the polar bear, who has acquired this habit for obvious reasons. It is lack of their customary food that compels animals to seek winter

quarters. When, therefore, the roots, berries and small reptile insect life upon which the badger mainly subsists are no longer procurable, he adopts the wisest course possible and goes to sleep until better times, leaving his rapacious cousins, the polecat, the stoat and the weasel, to carry on their sanguinary business as usual. In this respect again, the hedgehog, another insectivorous creature, follows the badger's example. In most of his ways, indeed, the prickly "urchin" is a badger in miniature. Like the grey prowler, he commits few real depredations, though neither animal is averse to availing himself of any windfall in the shape of a young bird or an egg that chance throws in his way. A hedgehog may enter a coop at times, just as a badger now and again forces his way into a hen-roost. Such instances are so unusual, however, that one cannot but wonder that people take so much trouble to "establish" them.

A hedgehog cannot burrow for himself; he lacks the badger's fossorial limbs, even as the badger lacks the prickly armour, though provided with a wiry coat of no common texture. The hedgehog loses little on account of this weakness, however, since he makes himself at home in anyone's burrow. Upon the Moor, indeed, he is sometimes content with a mere hollow under some sheltered bank, where, screened by tall ling or gorse, he retreats at winter's approach, there to make that astonishing little nest—one might almost call it a cocoon—which few people have an opportunity of seeing. A hedgehog deep in his winter sleep is literally encased in a thick wadding of dry grass, moss, straw, or any

material that may be obtainable ; and how the little beast succeeds in wrapping himself up so closely, and how he extricates himself again, are questions that may well puzzle an observer, or anyone unacquainted with the endless patience of the wild folk.

A hedgehog cannot be described as fair game to anyone. He is too defenceless, too inoffensive, and it speaks well for his timid methods of self-preservation that he exists in England to-day. The summer of 1930 for some unknown reason witnessed an unusual influx of hedgehogs. Rabbit-trappers caught them in extraordinary numbers, both upon the outskirts of the Moor and "in-country", which is the somewhat comprehensive Devon expression for all country other than Dartmoor. So numerous were the hedgehogs indeed, that they even penetrated to the cottage gardens, and a neighbour of mine who owns a few rough fields around his cottage, in early summer came frequently to me armed with a sack from which he would roll two or three "vuzzi-pigs" of various sizes upon the doorstep.

The badger up to a certain point is very well able to take care of himself. In a country of deep sandbanks, he has always an unassailable stronghold at hand, within which he can defy the most determined assault. Upon clay lands, on the contrary, or in shallow clitters where he cannot burrow deeply, he is helpless, and would soon be exterminated were he not more or less preserved for so-called "badger-hunting"—a pastime to be discouraged by all genuine sportsmen since the capture of the hapless creature is too frequently followed by baiting in

some barn or enclosure. Circumstances may render it advisable to destroy him, but there is neither occasion nor excuse for the cruelty that too often accompanies his capture. In this part of the world, when a "graze" is caught, it is an all-too-prevalent custom to "save him for another day", which means that he is kept about for an indefinite period, to be worried to death soon or late at his captors' pleasure. No decent-minded man has any use for this sort of thing, and it is the bounden duty of landowners who permit badger-digging to see to it that any animals taken are promptly and properly dispatched.

A "hunt" in North Devon some years ago resulted in the capture of two fine badgers which were eventually handed over to some men from a neighbouring town, who wished to convey them home for the usual humane purpose. After a rollicking hour spent at the nearest bar the party, boarding a market-cart in jolly-good-fellow style, started upon the return journey with the sack containing the badgers stuffed under the seat. None of the three men composing the party was exactly sober, but, their horse being of the stolid sort, they got along without mishap, and were bowling merrily down one of the long hills of the country when, without the slightest warning, the driver felt his leg seized from behind by powerful teeth. With a howl of consternation he sprang up, relinquished the reins, and losing his balance, rolled like a sack on to the road. His companions, meanwhile, realizing that the badgers by some strange mischance were loose among their unprotected legs, scrambled headlong over the tailboard, and the lightened vehicle with its unusual passengers trundled

away behind the now thoroughly startled horse. As usually happens in such cases, nobody was seriously hurt, and when the trio had sufficiently recovered to enable them to follow the cart, they found it overturned at the foot of the hill, the badgers, as might be supposed, being conspicuous by their absence.

The legitimate sport that the badger provides is little, but gunpowder is the medium that one would always recommend, when for any reason his death is desired. Given time and ordinary patience it is not difficult to shoot a badger. One need only lie in wait at his settes. Dawn is always a likely time to see him, and during midsummer afternoons when it is hot and stifling underground it repays one well to watch near big holts, as young badgers, who suffer severely from thirst, often come out for water between four and five o'clock. A keeper in the employ of the late Sir John Kennaway once shot six well-grown cubs within an hour, all coming down to drink from a woodland stream at the foot of a sand-bank. In spring or autumn, a moonlight night may serve as well, but the badger is a late riser, and one may wait long and see nothing. When earth-stopping for night-hunting, it is little use as a rule to get to work until a good hour after dark. If done earlier, the animals are seldom to be found out.

Above all things, the direction of the wind must be taken into account when choosing one's position. A badger's eyes are dull, but his long sensitive nose is the keenest that sifts the night, and the faintest suspicion of an alien presence is enough for him.



"LISFNING" BADGER AT THE WATERSIDE

*From a photograph by Frances Pitt*





It is a good plan to climb a tree, if possible, for there one's scent is carried away by the breeze. Unless provided with a rifle, it is not desirable to attempt a long shot, nor should one use very large pellets. No. 4 size will be found big enough. A larger load is less accurate, being too liable to scatter and wound rather than kill. Almost every sportsman-naturalist, when passing through the thoughtless stage, has matched his wits against those of the badger at some time or other, and endeavoured to circumvent him as he follows his own secluded way under the stars. After awhile, however, studying him year by year, learning more about his many curious and entertaining ways, the hunter's attitude gradually changes. One's sympathies go out to the independent stout-hearted beast, who, molesting nobody, asks only to be let alone. Far from scheming his overthrow, one loses all desire to turn the shy creature's happiness into tragedy, and offers him as a rule that measure of protection which lies within one's power.

Experts differ upon the question of his usefulness or otherwise in a hunting country; and here again so much depends upon circumstances that one hesitates to express a definite opinion. Where genuine doubt exists, however, it is a good rule to let Nature settle her own problems. Badgers, of course, mean open earths, but this is not a very important consideration upon Dartmoor where so little stopping is done, and against this one objection it must be remembered that their presence also means clean, healthy burrows and plenty of foxes above ground. Observation has dispelled my belief

in the old theory that the fox ousts the "grape" from his abode. It is very much the reverse, indeed, for rather is the badger apt to eject the would-be lodger with scant ceremony. An inexperienced huntsman sometimes wonders why upon occasions a hard-pressed fox does not avail himself of an open earth. There may be many reasons to account for the circumstance, each applicable in its own case, but more often than not it means that the interior of the burrow is even less desirable from the fox's point of view than the exterior, hounds or no hounds. I have little doubt that a crusty old badger not infrequently refuses right of entrance to anyone, and that is probably the reason why a fox at times does not retire to the extremity of a burrow, even at the near approach of the spade. As a rule he creeps into the farthest corner possible—naturally enough. When he refrains from doing so it usually means that someone else who does not welcome him very cordially is there before him. I once saw a fox that had taken refuge in a large main earth bolt into the very mouths of the astonished hounds outside, although no terrier had been introduced and the fox had been declared the victor. True, the badger does not often take such decided action, and in the instances that occur an old sow with cubs behind her is probably the aggressor. Badger cubs incidentally are born as a rule either considerably earlier or later than the vixen's litter, all depending upon whether the parents mate before or after hibernation.

A badger's work, whether at home or afield, is easily distinguishable from that of a fox. Being the stronger animal, he scatters the earth more

widely, tearing up the turf in large fragments which he throws back to a considerable distance. Fox-mould, on the other hand, is always fine, almost as if it had been sifted. The badger's entrance hall, again, is frequently carpeted with fragments of the litter which he carries in to make his bed. Also, one often sees curious little round balls of hard mud or clay mixed with fur lying about on his doorstep. Travelling as he does with his body so near the ground, his under fur naturally collects a great deal of soil which clogs into these balls. Unwilling to take them into his clean nest, however, he tears them off before going indoors, like a farmer shedding his field-boots. A fresh collection of these odd little pellets is one of the surest indications that a burrow is inhabited.

The footprints of the two animals again are so dissimilar that confusion is nearly impossible. Bear-like, the badger treads heavily and upon the "whole of the heel", leaving an elongated imprint with claw-marks deeply impressed at the one end. A fox, unless treading upon particularly soft ground, steps so mincingly that he leaves only the slight imprint of his claws, showing little more than pinpricks; his tracks are few, lying some eighteen inches apart, and usually in a perfectly straight line, except when he is galloping, in which case the fore-pads fall slightly apart. Excepting these peculiarities, there is little difference between a fox's footprints and those of a lightly stepping terrier dog.

The badger digs his earth in any locality where he can find suitable conditions. Solitude is a *sine qua*

*non*, and whenever possible he selects some sheltered slope warmed by the sun. Everything depends upon the soil, however; if need be, he burrows just as readily upon the bleakest ridge, and more than once I have found him established in a lonely cairn on the very summit of a high tor. One need only observe his dug-out and the immense ramparts that only too clearly betray his whereabouts to form a tolerable idea of his enormous strength and tireless energy. A holt which I recently examined in a precipitous Dartmoor coombe consisted of eleven huge holes, leading, as it seemed, into the very heart of the hill, with an immense accumulation of sand and stone heaped outside every entrance. Both hands were required to lift some of these stones, and a man would have had hard work to get them out with a pickaxe. Yet the badgers had done it, unaided by other tools than their own strong claws.

How long a badger might live in the wild state if left alone is a difficult point to decide. Some naturalists allot him fifteen years, but it is doubtful whether many attain to such longevity. Left to Nature, his decline is easy, his passing imperceptible. As old age creeps on, his periods of activity gradually lessen. He sleeps the greater part of his time, retiring earlier and emerging later every succeeding season, until at last there dawns a spring when the call of the awakening world fails to arouse him. Dame Nature in this respect has been very kind to her hibernating children. At winter's end I have found squirrels and little dormice too, which had gone to sleep in the fall of the year, curled up in

their snug nests, remaining asleep as they had always done through the long cheerless months, with this difference only that for once they did not awake when early buds were swelling.

## CHAPTER IX

### FOXES

THE mountain fox is generally described as a species quite apart from the common variety, but this, in the opinion of many experts, is a mistake. He undoubtedly differs in certain important respects from his more civilized cousin of the lowlands, but scarcely to the extent of forming a distinct species. On the contrary he merely illustrates a case common in Natural History—the moulding of form and habit to suit environment. When the sleek little foxes from cultivated lands are “turned down” in wilder country, in the course of a generation or so they acquire all the qualities, and even the superior bulk, of the true hill breed. It is interesting to note that the foxes of New South Wales, which were formerly introduced from this country, have attained to nearly double the size of their original progenitors.

Why animals reared on sterile hills are, as a rule, the finest of their breed, is a somewhat perplexing problem. Many naturalists account for it upon the survival of the fittest principle, but this, when fully considered, scarcely holds good. It cannot, for example, apply to rabbits, otherwise those found upon good ground, where they are more rigorously kept down, should be the bigger, whereas in truth

it is entirely the reverse. Anyhow, whatever the reason, the hill fox is a finer animal than his brother of the plain. He stands higher upon the leg, is broader between the ears, carries a better pelt, and is considerably heavier. In the matter of weight, by the way, foxes are very deceptive. Their light colour and buoyant action suggest a size which they do not really possess, and a great many hunting people who know them well enough by sight do not realize what slim light creatures they really are. The majority of lowland foxes weigh less than a stone, and comparatively few exceed sixteen pounds. The mountain fox not infrequently turns the scale at eighteen pounds, and I have handled two or three weighing a great deal more.

The difference in habit is essentially more pronounced. In mountainous country, where no heavy cover can be found, and where the granite hills permit no burrowing, the fox must kennel in any chance pile of rocks or upon the bare heath, and, if need be, foster a litter in some mere hollow on the face of a crag. To seek a hill fox successfully, an intimate knowledge of his habits is necessary. The most experienced lowland huntsman might spend whole days drawing seemingly likely places without result. One would naturally expect to find him upon the more sheltered slopes, or in sunny hollows, where the little mountain sheep browse the fresh shoots of the heather, and there doubtless he would choose to lie, but for one drawback. The warming patches of ling, so ideal from a fox's point of view, are likewise the resort of the Scotch cattle and the half-wild hill ponies, trampling and crashing



incessantly through the brakes, and if he would sleep undisturbed, the fox must find some place to which even the cattle cannot penetrate.

There are always the inaccessible rocks, and upon sunny days he desires nothing better than to lie and bask upon some flat boulder. Here, however, it is often bleak and cold. There is no escape from the tearing winds which, summer and winter alike, strip the uplands to the bone, and the fox, like the cat, is above all things a lover of warmth and good lying. Sunshine he must have, and with characteristic cleverness he has solved the difficulty. In every extensive hollow lurk deep and treacherous "pits" into which no heavy-footed animal can enter. Even in the worst bogs, however, there are firm spots, and to these places the light-stepping fox can pick his way dry-shod. Here, in the full glare of the sun he loves, with the humid breath of the swamp rising in a blue haze about him, he may sleep the noonday through, secure from disturbance in the ordinary way, and so profound are his dreams that by judiciously approaching upwind it is easy to surprise him.

When awake, nothing can exceed the wakefulness of a fox. Invariably, one might say, he sees before he is seen, and the intruder who gets as much as a fleeting glimpse of him is fortunate. His sleep, however, is astonishingly sound, nor does my own observation bear out the theory that the genuine animal

. . . sleeps yet hears

With the self that needs neither eyes nor ears.

Men who know where to look for them can and do destroy numbers of foxes by the simple process of

stalking them at midday when basking upon the sheltered ledges. A sheltered ledge of necessity means a high ledge behind, under cover of which the man with the gun approaches. Dartmoor sheepfarmers become singularly adept at this form of stalking, and a year or two ago one man, fined for the non-attendance of his child at the village school and resentful against society in general, imagined that he was paying off his grudge by shooting a number of foxes in this way within a few days.

John Bennett, whose line of craft was probably quite unique, was in the habit of catching adult foxes alive in a decidedly original manner. Guided only by his remarkable woodcraft and a lifelong knowledge of the haunts and habits of his quarry, he detected the whereabouts of a sleeping fox, stalked the wary one with a subtlety even greater than its own, and more often than not the astonished animal awoke to find itself in a grasp from which there was no escape.

He could not describe his methods. Indeed, he had none to describe. His was an instinct that is possessed in various forms by natural hunters the world over. One has seen plenty of men who can pick up sitting rabbits, handle rats without being bitten, and many more who without obvious forethought or effort of any sort have the knack of being in the right place at the right moment for whatever game they may happen to be after. Once when pursuing his peculiar occupation upon the artillery range, he espied a fox curled up on a low bank overgrown with heather, and after an elaborate stalk, pounced upon and caught the animal, only to find

it dead. Examination proved that its body had been riddled with shrapnel bullets from a shell that had burst no great distance away. An even more curious experience of his in this connection might be worth repeating. When picking his way across a piece of bogland one day, he unexpectedly flushed a blackcock, which his second barrel brought down when a long forty yards away. The bird fell obliquely, landing in some reeds among which his dog sought for a considerable time unsuccessfully. He was walking across to help in the search when the dog emerged carrying the trophy, trotted to meet him, then stopped suddenly before a little clump of furze, and with the bird still held aloft, drew to an unmistakable point. Expecting another grouse, he cocked his gun and waited. Nothing happened, however. The dog still stood like a stone, and at last, wondering what it could be, he advanced cautiously to the place. In the centre of the bush, snugly kennelled, lay a dog-fox sleeping solidly, despite the double shot fired literally over his head and the crashing of the dog through the reeds within a few yards of him.

Upon another occasion, he flushed a grouse which skimmed across a coombe and appeared to be in the act of alighting upon a bank of heather when it veered off suddenly, rising again into the air with a startled cry. At the same moment, a fox, obviously kennelled there, sprang up from the heather, made an ineffectual snap at the grouse, then resumed its original position.

Bennett also assured me that success in this branch of his art has invariably been achieved in the morning.

Never, he said, did he catch a fox napping late in the day, and I can well believe him. Anyone who has kept a tame fox knows how very much awake it becomes towards evening. To every rule there is an exception, however, and as an example of this an old moorland farmer once saw a somewhat unusual thing. One wild February afternoon, he went, as was his custom, to tend some cattle lying out on a rough pasture bordering the Moor. He fed the beasts upon hay stored in a shed for the purpose, and to avoid waste he carried it to a large bramble-bush which served as a natural "crib". He threw it down as usual, and was turning away, when something under the brambles caught his eye. Inspecting the object more closely, he was amazed to discover, not one, but two foxes, curled up sound asleep within five feet of his nose. This, I repeat, occurred during the month of February, when foxes forsake the even tenor of their ways, and early-morning frivolities no doubt accounted for the departure from habit.

During winter, particularly in country where the rabbit is a negligible quantity, one wonders how the hill fox contrives to pick up a living. He ranges over great distances, but even so, his bill of fare must be so limited that it is not difficult to believe at least some of the shepherd's accusations. When red grouse or black game are plentiful he stands a better chance, and in pursuit of the latter birds his tactics are much the same as those of the old moormen and their dogs, to which I have referred in a previous chapter. It is not always easy for even a fox to approach within spring of a squatting grouse,

nor does he attempt to do so as a rule. Ranging like a setter, he flushes the wily game, marks its line of flight and repeats the performance again and again. The blackcock, like its bulkier relative, the bush turkey, is very subject to panic, and is therefore unable in such a case to make use of its exceptional wing-power. Each succeeding flight is shorter, and becoming more and more terrified by the persistence of its pursuer, it soon abandons the use of its wings altogether and is speedily caught. The whole proceeding was described to me by a man who has witnessed it many times, and upon whose word I can place implicit trust.

There is reason to believe that our red friend employs similar methods against other feathered neighbours. During early summer every little upland spinney has its brood of young crows or magpies of which the fox takes undoubted toll. I have seen the remains of such birds littered about an earth, and until a chance question revealed his manner of running down grouse, it puzzled me considerably to imagine how he got hold of them. By the means described it would be easy, for before the young birds grow strong on the wing they spend most of their time upon the ground, for lack of a safer perch, and would fall easy victims. This is probably the main reason for the fierce hostility that the crow family displays towards the vulpine race. When a roving magpie detects a fox asleep in some quiet nook, he loses no time in announcing the discovery; every bird within hearing rallies to the cry, and unless the fox can speedily efface himself, he will have no peace until roosting-time. The clamour of the birds upon

these occasions is unmistakable, and the moormen are thus frequently informed of a fox's whereabouts. The knowledge can seldom be turned to account, however, for while the fox, preoccupied and irritated by the barracking, might be approached without difficulty, there are the ever-watchful crows to be taken into account. More than once I have been the witness of one of these little episodes. A fox, kennelled in some little coppice, has been espied. The surrounding bushes are crowded with excited magpies, chattering and scolding, but keeping a respectful distance. Upon the higher levels sit the carrion crows, grimly observant, while the object of general interest crouches in the shadow of a rock, glaring from side to side and grinning furiously at his tormentors. One has approached perhaps to within a hundred yards of the group when some wary blackamoor becomes aware of one's presence. A warning croak is given, inaudible, one would have thought, amid the outcry, but not a bit of it! Instantly every sound is hushed; the assemblage breaks up with astonishing silence and suddenness. The magpies vanish; the crows wing heavily away; there is a flash of russet among the rocks, and one glances at the spot where the fox crouched a second before, only to find it vacant. The warning was as much for him as for anybody.

Like most beasts of prey, the fox is very methodical in his habits. He is bound by no rule, and hunts when and where the fancy takes him; none the less, there are prescribed times for his activities. One occasionally sees him prowling about on dark December afternoons, but this is unusual, and in the

dead of winter his voice is rarely heard until after sundown. During the long summer evenings he is always astir, but he does not necessarily begin his hunting while daylight lasts. It is easy to tell whether he means business or not by the behaviour of the rabbits. In late afternoon, or an hour or two after sunrise in midsummer, they scarcely trouble to avoid him, nor does he attempt to touch them on such occasions beyond making, perhaps, a playful jump or two at any which by their boldness almost invite capture. Upon one occasion John Bennett watched a fox for upwards of an hour "having a fine caper" in a little hollow near Dinger Tor with rabbits all round him. The fox was frisking and tumbling about, pirouetting round and round after his brush, and executing every imaginable antic for no apparent reason. Having heard about foxes "fascinating" rabbits and wild fowl by similar means, the man naturally thought that such was the game. He waited, thinking, as he naively expressed it, that "if he caught one, I could have 'un". The game continued so long, however, that his patience became exhausted, and he went away leaving the fox to reap the full reward of its labours should success attend them. In this case, the rabbits appeared to be quite unmoved, merely hopping out of the performer's way if he came too near, and it is frequently so while daylight lasts. When dusk falls, however, when the glow-worms light up and nightjars are in full chorus, it is a very different story. Then his activities really begin, and the small wild life of the moorland has good cause to know it.

For choice, the normal fox is always a hunter of fur rather than feather. Rabbits and small rodents generally constitute his ordinary bill of fare, and, as a general rule, his living comes easily to him. In winter, according to the sheep-farmer, he subsists entirely on lambs. But as mountain lambs do not arrive until the worst of the hard season is over, these cannot provide a very frequent item in his menu. Many sheep and cattle, it must be remembered, die on the uplands, and a good solid carcase doubtless keeps a hungry fox going for some time. He also unearths all the moles he can find, and hunts the marshes assiduously for frogs and voles; but these sources of supply becoming exhausted, he has to "fill up the chinks" with even lighter fare, and there can be no doubt that his diet is largely insectivorous. Study will show that, like the carrion crow, he scours the newly swaled lands for "roasted snails", those being the big black slugs that are destroyed in great numbers when the heather is burned. Black beetles, too, and sundry grubs are not despised, and to find these, he turns over loose turf, wisps of badger-hay, stones, or anything under which insects might lurk. On summer evenings he snaps up considerable numbers of moths and "chafers" on the wing, springing sometimes several feet from the ground to catch them when in flight. He has a sweet tooth, too, differing not at all in that respect from his representative of Solomon's days, and during the brief period when wild fruits are ripe, he eats little else. I once observed a fox executing antics among some bramble-bushes, and found, upon investigation, that he was blackberrying, balancing



himself upon his hind-legs the better to reach the higher and riper fruit.

Concerning lambs, again, many curious tales are told. An old Throwleigh shepherd going the round one wild March morning, when driving mist and snow-showers shrouded the uplands, saw something which at first glance he mistook for a collie-dog stealing away from the vicinity of his flock. But a clearer view, as the mist lifted somewhat, dispelled the illusion, and he saw that the stranger was a large hill fox carrying something in its jaws. Suspecting the case, he set his dog on, and the robber, taking alarm, dropped his load and made off, with the dog in full chase. He saw no more of the fox, for at that moment a bank of fog came rolling down from Cosdon Beacon and enfolded the hillside like a curtain. The fox's burden, however, lay there in full view, and proved to be a lamb, new-born and still living—little the worse, indeed, for the experience.

That the story is true I have no doubt. There is no justification for discrediting this and various instances of a similar nature that are recorded from time to time. Nor can it be denied that crippled or mangy foxes occasionally develop into lamb-killers, even as the big carnivores, when old or maimed, are liable to become man-eaters. Incidentally, in all cases where doubt exists as to whether a fox or a dog is the culprit, the raider's identity may easily be established by his methods. A fox invariably begins the gruesome feast with the tongue, which he eats out, as often as not leaving the remainder of the carcase untouched. A dog, on the other hand, attacks the entrails, while ravens, crows,

and other rapacious birds of their order invariably make for the eyes. Foxes, like dogs, pick up as many dead lambs as may be lying about. It is nothing unusual to find remains and even entire carcases upon earths where cubs are lodged, and when a vixen has occasion to shift a litter to other quarters she removes the larder also. It is possible, again, that certain foxes may develop the habit of visiting a lambing fold, now and again snapping up a weakling. These lambs must be exceedingly feeble, however, and in most cases unadopted by the parent. If there is reason to believe that a fox is visiting a fold, it is a good plan to leave an old stable lantern alight in the field. This usually serves to keep the robber at a distance. Authenticated cases of actual killing are so rare, however, that in common fairness they can only be treated, like so many things of this kind, as exceptions that prove the rule. The following lines from *Dartmoor Days* contain the most convincing argument that can be advanced upon this question :

Think you, said he, in this wild spot,  
Where human aid avails them not ;  
Where shelter in the ferns and rocks  
Is shared alike by lambs and fox,  
If once a fox by hunger led,  
The blood of lambs had fiercely shed,  
That e'er again that fox would stay  
His havoc on the helpless prey ?  
Ah no ! The beast would soon be found  
The terror of the country round ;  
The slayer would destroy by scores  
His victims on the lonely moors ;  
And every farmer then might fear  
The devastation far and near.

That even full-grown animals, if disabled, are liable to attack by hungry foxes cannot be denied. The gruesome case of a pony, unable to drop her foal which was partly eaten while still unborn, together with portions of the living mother's body, supplies a grim example of the atrocities which a mountain fox is capable of committing. Such an incident, however, is happily almost unique.

Anyone who knows the hill fox can scarcely fail to wonder that an animal so infinitely wild and shy ever ventures to approach human habitations, even when pressed by hunger. It should be remarked, however, that a fox, like many nocturnal creatures, appears to lose timidity at nightfall. One early summer evening, I was watching, or rather listening to a pair of ring-ouzel which seemed to have a nest in a clitter near by, when, glancing suddenly round, a gleam of white on a heathery slope some fifty yards away caught my eye. It had not been there a minute ago I was convinced, and even as I looked it disappeared. Some disturbance in the ouzel household attracted my attention for the moment, and when I looked again, not one but two white objects were visible in the heather. It was getting "dimpsy"; ghostly nightjars were already flitting about with wavy, soundless flight, and in the deepening twilight it was not easy to distinguish even near objects very clearly. There was still light enough to use a glass, however, and with its aid I was able to solve the riddle. The white spots were the light breasts of two foxes, sitting erect, and studying me with wide-eyed interest. Needless to say when I reached the place a few moments later, there was nothing to be

seen in any direction save the darkening heath, no sound save the rustle of the night wind in the ling-tips, and one almost doubted the reality of the experience.

There are many "authenticated" cases of ferocity displayed by vixens during the breeding-season, but these must be accepted with caution. I do not mean to question anyone's veracity, but more often than not that little elucidating circumstance which makes all the difference gets omitted as the tale goes round, and the whole incident is discredited in consequence.

For example, a year or so ago a moorland farmer happened to see a vixen snap up a cockerel at twilight and make off with it. He suspected the raider to be the mother of a litter berthed in a plantation near by, and, being naturally anxious to recover his property, he gave chase, supposing that the victim would drop her booty when she found herself pursued. Strange to say, she did nothing of the sort, for all his shouting, and, having viewed her into the plantation, he made straight tracks for the earth as a last resource. He had scarcely entered the cover, however, when the fox sprang up in his path, having "lain up" for him, it would seem, and without further ado sank sharp teeth into the calf of his leg. The unexpectedness of the attack, together with the darkness and general disadvantages of his position, proved too much for the good man, who vacated hastily, leaving the virago in possession of the field—and the cockerel.

A tall yarn? Yes. And the reader must use his own judgment about accepting it. Assuming it to be true, however—and it is believed in the neigh-

bourhood, I understand—one might venture to suggest that there has been at least one notable omission. It is more than probable that the fox was cornered in some way. There may easily have been some obstacle that she could not negotiate in a hurry when hampered with her load. More likely still, she had run into a trap or a snare. It was dark, remember, in the wood, and the man did not wait to study details. Many a fox-hunt ends in a similar manner, little suspected by laymen of the field. The fox who for no apparent reason awaits his pursuers under a hedgerow or at a cover side never does so of his own free will. The explanation is usually crammed into the huntsman's pocket, or pitched out of sight before anyone gets wind of it, and with tolerable safety one may assume that something of the kind occurred in the instance given.

Making full allowance, however, for embellishments and omissions in stories of this kind, they cannot be dismissed offhand. It must be remembered that foxes are highly individualized creatures, and this circumstance upon occasions may serve to account for incidents that otherwise defy explanation. Last summer, on the moors near Dart Head, a little cub not much bigger than a rabbit betrayed himself by barking savagely—from sheer fright no doubt—at a passing turf-cutter, who chased and caught him. The little hothead was handed over to a local sportsman, who kept him for some weeks in a loose box, subsequently releasing him, but he was savage to the last and quite unlike the majority of his kind, who soon become more or less tractable in captivity.

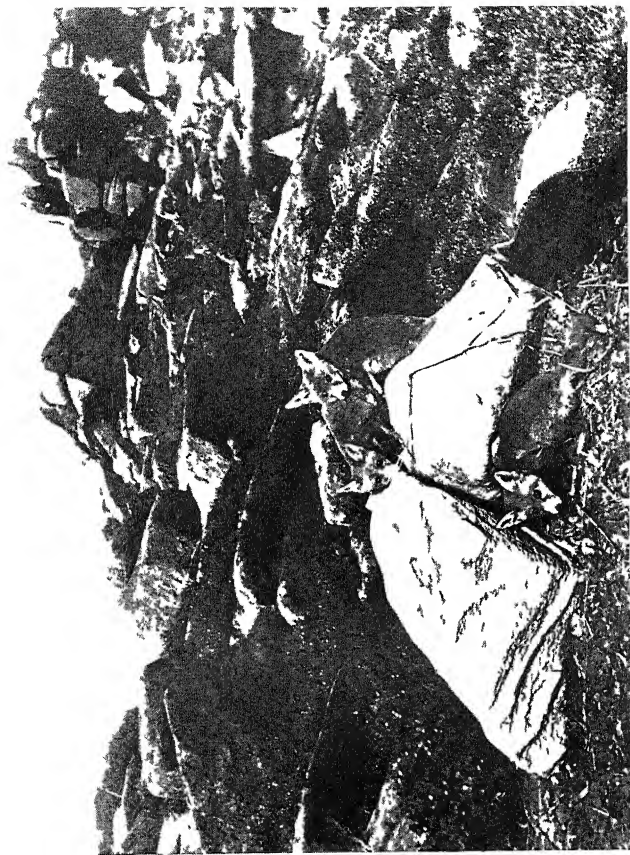
The breeding habits of foxes are necessarily affected by the character of the country. But whether upon the mountain or in the home plantation there is one requirement that is never overlooked. That is privacy. For her nursery a mountain vixen makes use of any little natural cairn or pile of tumbled rocks. She prefers an earth, however, selecting an old badger-burrow when possible, for this is both deep and dry, and almost invariably opens upon some sheltered slope. A strong partiality is shown for earths overgrown with gorse or brier, or any spot where the lie of the land further aids the purpose of concealment. Some sunny open space near by in which the cubs can play is an essential feature, also warmth, for which reason it is seldom of much use to seek litters upon bleak ridges, or upon any slope facing north or east, unless the place happens to possess remarkable advantages.

Indeed, the hill-bred vixen lays down her cubs in many quaint and curious places, and so shallow is their stronghold as a rule that one wonders how any survive the exhaustive search made for them. This is particularly the case during dry seasons, when the paramount necessity of being near water often compels her to choose some insecure nursery near the bank of a stream. Should the season be wet, plenty of "catch-water" can be obtained among the rocks, and then, as a rule, the cubs are safely housed in an immense clitter or under some immovable block of granite.

They breed late upon the Dartmoor hills, and one seldom sees cubs running about before the middle of June. Then numbers are taken out, either by

authorized parties for turning down in depleted countries, or surreptitiously by the sheep-farmers or by village loafers, who dispose of the cubs at a profit. Litters stand slight chance against those who seek them with intent. The cubs are so conspicuous as they frisk about the bare hillsides on sunny afternoons, and even when berthed in impregnable clitters, the moormen have a very simple device for bringing them within shot if desirous of destroying them. Every boy who carries a gun knows the sibilant sound which makes the feeding rabbit sit erect, so that the shot may take better effect. It is not generally known, however, that similar "chirruping", uttered within a discreet distance, and well to leeward of their earth, seldom fails to lure fox-cubs out, particularly about dusk—their customary feeding-time. Presumably, they mistake this sound for the cry of a bird such as a young meadow-pipit or a lark, in the old vixen's jaws. At any rate, the dodge is as effective as it is simple, when the destruction of the litter is the trickster's aim. They can seldom be taken alive by this means, however. Bennett, who upon various occasions called well-grown cubs literally to within a few yards of him, never succeeded in catching one in this manner, though he could have shot an incredible number. He sometimes tried to take them in nets or in traps, set with all silence and secrecy in their main paths hours beforehand, but in every such instance the cubs appeared to suspect trickery of some sort and remained underground.

One of the last litters that he caught was taken in a somewhat unusual way. He was returning at



“QUI VIVE ” A DARI MOOR LITTER

*From a photograph by Richard Reason*





dusk from a rabbit-stalking expedition along the brow of one of the many deep coombes of the country, and his path skirted a tangled brake of gorse and brier where rabbits abounded. He was treading cautiously in the hope of a last shot, when the subdued but merry clamour of fox-cubs at play—"burrking agin one another", he called it—reached his ears. They were somewhere deep in the shadowy valley beneath him, and knowing of an earth in the vicinity, he worked his way with infinite patience towards it, and at last, peering through a six-foot screen of age-old furze on to a little mossy clearing worn smooth by rabbits' gambols, could just discern the dim forms of the little merrymakers frisking about like kittens within a few feet of him.

He was commissioned by the Hunt at the time to procure cubs, and the sight in consequence had a practical as well as a sentimental appeal. He was wondering whether it would be possible to catch any of them before they could get back to the earth, when an electrifying squall immediately behind him "nearly shot the cap off his head". He knew what it was. The vixen, approaching silent-footed through the brake, had discovered the intruder and adopted this startling manner of introducing herself. So scaring was the sound, however, particularly at close quarters, that it brought him round in quick time. He saw nothing of the fox. There was not as much as a rustle to betray her whereabouts, and when he looked round again the cubs had vanished as by magic, leaving him uncertain as to whether Mother Earth or the encircling brushwood had swallowed them up.

For the moment he could do nothing. It was certain, however, that the wary mother would remove the litter to other quarters before sunrise, and with his intimate knowledge of the country, backed by an instinct almost akin to that of the fox herself, he was never in the slightest doubt as to where she would take them. There were not many suitable nurseries in the district, and he was convinced that her choice would fall upon an old rabbit-warren a mile or so down the valley. Being anxious to locate them as quickly as possible, he did not allow the grass to grow under his feet, and dawn found him at the place, posted well to leeward of the burrows, and waiting anxiously for daylight. The sun came up ; a light wind, rolling back the mist, gave him a clear view of the sandbank where he believed the foxes to be, but nothing was to be seen save the twinkle of white scuts here and there where the rabbits hopped, and as these one by one disappeared into their burrows, he began to fear that his instinct for once had played him false. A dilapidated wall of loose granite blocks nominally enclosed the warren, and alongside this there straggled a few wind-warped firs, among which some magpies were chattering. He was endeavouring to locate the birds for lack of other interest, when movement on a lower level caught his eye. From a corner where the firs grew thickest, the light, stealing form of the vixen slid forth like a shadow, halted for a moment with one paw uplifted, pointer fashion, while she flaired the air and looked cautiously about, then, turning again, was lost to view among the trees.

A few seconds later she reappeared, this time with

three little dark objects trickling along behind her. Straight down a sheep-path came the interesting procession, heading for the sandbank where, doubtless, a new home had already been selected. The watcher waited his time, then, when the cubs were passing over some shallow burrows, he sprang from his cover with a shout. The surprise proved too much even for the vixen, who turned tail, leaving the little ones to take care of themselves. Thus abandoned, they merely dived headlong into the nearest holes. The man, coming up, stopped them in—with stones, not earth for fear of suffocating them—and returning later with tools and an assistant secured them without difficulty.

One often reads about a fox “yapping on the trail of a rabbit”. Such passages usually occur in works of fiction, and presumably are not intended to be taken literally. So, without fear of hurting the feelings of the most sensitive author, I may venture to question whether this remarkable hunter ever utters a sound when at business with any game. He hunts all the year round, but, it should be remembered, there are long periods during which his voice is never heard, so it is scarcely reasonable to suppose that he would “quest” one month and run mute the next. Besides, that is not his way of hunting. His methods are rather cat-like as a rule. It is quite possible that mated foxes, when hunting jointly, have signal cries that they make use of upon occasions, but, speaking generally, I think it is safe to say that they work in absolute silence.

Their cries, and the impulses that prompt their utterance, offer scope for fascinating research. Most

familiar, perhaps, is the hollow shrill call of a dog-fox, usually four notes, uttered about sundown, or during that eerie hour before the dawn when all Nature vibrates to some mysterious indefinable touch. Then there is the cry heard at midnight, or in the hush of the small hours, a sharp double note, or occasionally a single yap not unlike the cry of a questing terrier. A farm-labourer whom I know once stalked a fox which he heard "barking" not far away, and succeeded in getting a view of it whilst giving tongue. It was sitting, he said, upon a mound, with nose pointing skywards like a collie baying the moon.

The cries peculiar to a vixen, though more distinctive, are also more variable, and therefore less easily described or classified. In the early part of the year her voice may always be identified by its harsher tone, and towards midsummer she occasionally gives a curious whining howl, which is intended, I believe, to call her cubs together. Again at the same season, certain vixens acquire the habit of barking even at human intruders—a habit entirely foreign to their nature, one would have thought.

Lastly, and most noteworthy of all a fox's vocal outpourings, there is the harsh shuddering scream, which once in a lifetime startles the camper or the trapper on his midnight round. This cry, if like anything at all, most closely resembles the indescribable haunting shriek of a horse in agony—for which, indeed, I have known it to be mistaken—and is beyond question the most unearthly wild sound ever heard upon our English hills. Its object remains a complete mystery. It is sometimes,

perhaps, the plaint of a bereaved parent, but such cannot always be the case, for I have heard it given again and again by a vixen whose litter certainly had not been tampered with. That it is an expression of distress of some kind can scarcely be doubted by anyone who has heard it at close quarters.

As a rule foxes are silent during the summer months, but one may hear them upon exceedingly rare occasions at almost any time of year, for there is no hard and fast law where Natural History is concerned. They begin to give tongue in late October or November, much depending upon locality, and continue intermittently until April, when dog-foxes usually become mute. May and June are silent months, but soon after midsummer the vixen may again be heard. It should be observed that during February, when three or four dog-foxes are sometimes found in attendance upon one vixen, they may bark all day long upon lonely hillsides. By daylight, however, the sound has a curious muffled quality which renders it inaudible at any great distance.

This same habit of trailing vixens suggests the inevitable question as to whether foxes will mate with dogs. They whose word is law in such matters have declared in the negative—a trifle dogmatically perhaps. From a scientific point of view there appears to be no reason why the blend should be impossible, nor does it seem quite fair to disbelieve those who claim to know of cases where it has occurred. At certain seasons wolves will intermix readily with their domesticated cousins, and in the Far West it is nothing unusual to see coyotes running with cattle-dogs. If, therefore, sentimental relations can exist

between wolves and dogs, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose them possible between dogs and foxes, which are almost as closely allied.

In this connection an incident once occurred with our old beagle pack which admitted of but one explanation. A late snowfall having prevented hunting, we had taken the little "ladies" out for road exercise and were just rekennelling them when a groom, a thoroughly reliable man, rode up in a high state of excitement. He had been watching a fox which had been following us, running the line of the pack with nose to ground, as a dog might have done. So absorbed was the animal that it took no notice of him, and was little more than a gunshot astern of the beagles when the chance crack of a whip scaring it, the fox broke the wayside fence and disappeared. Nothing would satisfy the man but that we should accompany him to the spot where he had last seen our strange attendant, and there, sure enough, were the unmistakable tracks leading away across the snow.

Admittedly, the cross would be most difficult to obtain, and in one case within my knowledge a vixen, though born and reared in captivity, definitely declined to permit the advances of various dogs with whom she lived upon terms of perfect friendliness. Upon the other hand, there can be no doubt about the willingness of certain male foxes to effect the blend. The Rev. F. W. Hobbs, of Newton St. Petrock, Devon, for many years owned an animal which he confidently believed to be a hybrid. It was a curious-looking beast, bred from a terrier bitch, the supposed sire being a tame dog-fox

which was kept upon the premises at the time. Unfortunately, nobody could swear to the relationship; nevertheless it was impossible to watch the "dog" in question and entertain the slightest doubt as to his pedigree. There was so much about him that proclaimed his suspected progenitor. He had the erect pointed ears of the fox, the same lightness of movement, the same peculiar snarl when provoked. But it was his hunting methods above all else that declared his breed. He was so quick, alert, and withal so uncannily silent. Indeed, I never heard him utter as much as a whimper for any cause whatever. A rabbit within springing distance of him was as good as dead, but the most remarkable thing I noticed about him was the aptitude he displayed when catching moles. To watch him at this work was an education. If there was a mole anywhere near the surface, he seemed to know it the moment he got within ten yards of the place. He would at once proceed to stalk it, and patiently follow its subterranean movements—which, by the way, seemed to be imperceptible to any of the other dogs—until it reached some particularly shallow place. Then would come the unerring pounce and snap which seldom failed to bring the little velvet-coated gentleman to light.

Again his peculiar manner of "marking", which one can only describe as badger-like, very forcibly suggested the wild, but most remarkable of all was his trick of *going to ground*. This he was apt to do when exhausted at the end of a long day's shooting. When a move for home is made, and sport—as all dogs understand—is over for the day, it is nothing



unusual for spaniels and even hounds to curl up and go to sleep in the most comfortable place they can find, if sufficiently tired and allowed to do so—to lie out, in sporting language. This strange animal, however, went one better, and would seize the first opportunity to slip into some deep dry burrow, from which, once snugly ensconced, nothing would induce him to move. Upon one occasion, a bitch of the same strain went to ground to whelp, and weeks elapsed before access to the puppies could be obtained.

It should be remarked that the hill fox, like the coyote, displays very little fear of cattle-dogs and even of greyhounds, and misplaced confidence in this respect frequently results in his premature dispatch to the shadowy hunting-grounds. An old inhabitant of Sticklepath who saw a great deal of fox-coursing in his youth tells a curious story. When out with a party of kindred spirits upon the hills north of the Teign, a fox was sighted upon the slope of Waterton Tor a quarter of a mile away. One of the greyhounds, a somewhat famous dog, was chivvied on and an exciting chase ensued. The fox had a substantial start, but it soon became apparent that its capture was scarcely a matter of minutes. A scant fifty yards at last divided them, with the dog still gaining at every bound, when to the astonishment of everyone the fox faced about and trotted back unconcernedly to meet its pursuer. Even the greyhound was taken aback. It stopped short in its rush, circled the fox, stiff-legged and bristling, but made no attempt to attack it. And so they went on, “walking round one another” along the hillside,

until the crafty one by insidious stages worked his way to a convenient pile of rocks, where he took refuge.

Range dogs account for a great many foxes. They appear to share the wolf's dislike of their red relative, and it is curious to note that the fox, though incomparably the swifter and more nimble animal, makes little apparent effort to escape. One old sheep-dog in Belstone parish a few years ago was supposed to have killed no fewer than a dozen in the course of a single season, although a first-class pack of hounds could not bring one quarter of that number to book.

The percentage of foxes actually killed by hounds upon the wilder moorlands is small. A few are shot. A certain number of cubs are dug out and worried, but the greater number fall victims to poison baits. Some years ago, a neighbour of mine was plagued by a superabundance of magpies upon his farm, and, having tried other means without success, as a last resource he put down arsenic. The bait consisted of dead rats which he scattered about a little clearing between two plantations, well out of harm's way, as he thought. A few days later, however, when going the round, he picked up the bodies of three foxes, all within a short distance of the baits. The old story, rats or moles! No fox can resist them, and by this means after death the small animals not infrequently take indirect vengeance upon their arch-enemy.

They have yet another strange weakness which often proves their undoing. They cannot resist a dead cat. They do not eat such uninviting fare, but like to rub against it in dog fashion; and as cats

figure largely in a keeper's larder, this strange but deadly bait is usually obtainable when required.

Natural enemies the fox has none, though now and again death by violence overtakes him, apart from the agency of man. Distinctly remarkable was the experience of one trapper when going his round by the light of a flying moon. He was picking his way along a hill road between two fir plantations when not far ahead he heard an ugly, worrying noise, like savage beasts in conflict. He advanced cautiously towards a deep ditch whence the sounds proceeded, and peeping down saw a badger at bay, defending himself fiercely from the combined attack of two foxes. All three were so intent upon their quarrel that they had not heard the man's approach, but the sudden glare of his lantern ended the fight, or rather, proclaimed a momentary truce, for the three animals merely scrambled over a hedge into the deeper gloom of the wood, where a few seconds later sounds of renewed conflict arose. The trapper resumed his way, but next day, when taking the same round, he entered the wood to read, if possible, the tale of the night. This proved easy, for the needle-strewn woodland carpet was as impressionable as sawdust and reported in full detail all that had occurred. There had been a fierce running fight for some distance. Tufts of fur, red and grey, were littered freely about, and it was evident that the badger had been at some difficulty to rid himself of his assailants. He had done so, however, and to terrible purpose, for at the far end of the wood, where the final scrimmage must have taken place, lay the stark body of one of the foxes. The man

carried it home to substantiate his story, and there could be no mistaking the badger's handiwork.

This incident recalls the case of an old "graye" which I once found upon Haldon when literally in his last gasp. He had been terribly mauled a few hours previously, as far as one could judge, and I have often wondered what was his story, for no badger-digging or affray of the kind had taken place anywhere in the neighbourhood.

Occasional glimpses such as these serve to indicate how little one really knows about the inner life of our own wild creatures ; of the romance and tragedy which only the rocks and stars witness. For all that Nature study has revealed, there are animals, even in Great Britain, much of whose history remains obscure to this day, while others are passing, or have passed already, leaving the unguessed riddle of their lives a bequest to posterity.

•

## CHAPTER X

## SILVER TONGUES

MIST-SHROUDED and desolate, the moorland stretches under the waning moon. A bitter March wind wails disconsolately across the waste, wrinkling the surface of the little ice-rimmed pools, and driving the scurrying snow-showers along in fitful squalls. From the barren ridges—quite the last place upon which one would expect living creatures to assemble—there comes now and again the plover's call, clear and sweet as wind-glass chinking. In the dank hollows the intermittent, ghostly drumming of restless snipe fills the air with mystery, and at last, far upwind, there sounds a faint cry which even distance cannot disguise, followed in quick time by the creaking swish of pinions. Another whistling cry to which the plovers respond in a minor key, then through the mist and pale moonshine the rush of descending wings, followed by silence as before, broken only by the moan of the night wind wandering, as if lost, over the lonely mires. To-morrow blizzards may rage, yet the upland shepherd, nothing daunted, will talk of spring, for, far-sounding and tuneful through the storm, is heard the curlew's call, and with the arrival of the "silver-tongued bird" there comes at least the promise of better things.

Though scarcely a game-bird, or even a fair subject for sport, few birds appeal more strongly to outdoor and sporting men. This is largely due to association, no doubt, the curlew being pre-eminently a *wild* bird, whose habitat is confined to places most dear to the heart of the Nature-lover. Curlew-haunted country is almost invariably interesting country, the home of our wildest creatures, and here upon Dartmoor the species is still found in the distinguished company of the raven, the buzzard, the hen-harrier and the blackcock. There is indeed an atmosphere of romance attached to his history. Even the type of man who has few fancy notions and rarely hesitates to discharge his gun at anything wild whenever an opportunity occurs seldom expends powder upon a curlew. "I did it because I wanted to see what they was like, but I shouldn't shoot no more," was the quite unsolicited comment upon his own action once made to me by a local farmer's son, who had shot a pair of these birds. He was anxious to justify himself, though neither by word nor look had I knowingly expressed disapproval. Such is the common attitude of the countryman towards the species, and this is the more remarkable when one remembers that the things which constitute the curlew's special charm—his musical cry, his bold restless spirit and romantic personality—do not appeal to the native mind. "Noisy old birds" was all one son of the soil had to say about them, while another, living upon the edge of a favourite marsh where drumming snipe and whistling curlews made harmony the summer night through, complained bitterly of the "miserable old row",

which disturbed his slumbers during the nesting season.

It strikes one as curious that a bird of such outstanding charm and personality should occupy so inconspicuous a place in tradition, folk-lore and all ancient literature. Even the comparatively modern poets of, say, a century ago, appear to have overlooked the curlew with its arresting name and peculiar capacity for creating "atmosphere". Tennyson, in his *Locksley Hall*, had only to mention the "curlew's call" to bring the setting of that memorable mansion before the reader's eye in vivid reality. There is something curiously realistic and descriptive in such expressions as "curlew", or "curlew-haunted". They conjure up a picture of fragrant peaty wastes flecked with bog-cotton where the snipe drums in springtime; or they are charged with the smell of the sea-wind blowing fresh and free over limitless sand-flats, yet for some strange reason scarcely a poet of the eighteenth century paid tribute to the curlew, who, in the words of Phil Robinson, "adds grace to a line, and the bird itself a grace to every scene". Thompson's bittern "shakes the marsh"; his plovers "sing their wild notes to the listening waste", but he found no room for the silver-tongued piper whose clear flute pitches the keynote in Spring's symphony. Indeed, as often as not, it is not merely a case of failure to appreciate but of actual misrepresentation. "Wild and harsh", the exceedingly scarce curlew of literature "screams" now and again from the lines of Scott or Leyden, and while its remarkable wildness remains unquestionable, it seems nothing short of astonishing that a

cry so eminently musical should be described as "harsh", or by any stretch of the imagination converted into a scream.

The curlew is one of the few British birds that bears a strictly onomatopœic name, but, even so, the distinctive call-note which upon paper can be represented by the syllables *curl-ew* is far from being the most characteristic of the bird's many and varied cries. Most musical perhaps is the long-drawn, trilling love-note, or rather, succession of notes, beginning with a low crooning whistle and mounting in a rippling crescendo to its topmost pitch, where it lingers for a few seconds, like the sound of a tuning-fork, then slowly dies away. As the summer wanes, the croon disappears, while the trill, remaining, acquires a restless and almost fretful tone. There is now more than a hint of yearning in the cry which suggests Masfield's apt expression, "a summer mourner".

Lamenting indeed the curlew always appears to be at this time of year, for in truth he is homesick, being little better than an exile upon the moors, however voluntary his banishment. Strictly he belongs to the coast, or more particularly, sandy beaches, the mud-flats of big estuaries, or the banks of tidal rivers, where all winter he leads a hard solitary life, feeding upon the heterogeneous matter exposed by the ebb tide. He comes inland for breeding purposes only. The young birds are hurried away to their more natural environment at the earliest possible moment, and long before the brood is fit to fly, the parents are all impatient to be away.

It should be remarked that curlews do not appear



to reach maturity until their second season, and that the immature birds, large numbers of which come south every autumn, remain upon the coasts throughout the year. Officially, the nest is made upon some high hillside well above the level of cultivation. Actually—so far at least as my own observation serves—the bird chooses some warm hollow, not necessarily upon the moors at all, being particularly partial to grazing marshes or swampy meadows, especially if these border upon wilder country. Formerly, no doubt, the species bred in all parts of the kingdom, wherever suitable conditions prevailed, and within comparatively recent years Mr. Kearton records the finding of eggs upon a Surrey moor within a short distance of the Metropolis.

I have frequently noticed that the same spot is used for several seasons in succession, from which it is evident that the female bird returns annually to an undisturbed nursery, but whether accompanied by the same husband is an open question. Upon Dartmoor, the first pairs arrive about the middle of March, and some six weeks later the eggs are laid. The nest, like that of the snipe, is a mere hollow in the heath, lined with a few wisps of coarse grass or sedges, sometimes placed in the lee of a hummock, more frequently upon open ground with nothing to distinguish it from its surroundings. The normal clutch consists of four, and the green, dark-spotted, pear-shaped eggs lie point to point in the nest, after the customary manner of wading birds. Naturalists of all ages have faithfully recorded this peculiarity, but few, if any, have suggested a reason for it. There is a reason for every "freak" in Nature, though it

may not be easy to find. My own theory in this case is a simple one. Birds who nest in the open with no protection other than their own colouring must necessarily squat closely when brooding, while the nest can never be deeply hollowed like those built in trees or shrubs or it would become water-logged. This involves closer pressure than the eggs could stand if deposited in the ordinary way. When placed in the prescribed manner, however, the surface of the clutch presents a hollow centre, into which the breast of the brooding bird fits comfortably, while the larger ends of the eggs are well covered by the ample wings.

However that may be, the X formation appears to be a *sine qua non*, so far as successful incubation is concerned, and the bird will have no other. A farm-labourer once told me that having found a curlew's nest in a field which he crossed daily upon his way to work, he amused himself by reversing the order each morning, placing the large ends inwards. Invariably, upon his return at nightfall, the bird had rearranged them, and the eggs lay point to point once more in the approved style. There is no harder nest to find, no bird that gives the nest-hunter less assistance. The eggs of the snipe, for example, quite as effectively concealed by colour and surroundings, may be discovered at any time by the simple process of walking the bog systematically until the brooding bird betrays the secret by rising accommodately from almost under one's feet. Very different, however, in this respect is the curlew. At the first hint of an alien presence she steals away, her brown, gliding form invisible on the brown

landscape, and not until her long-striding legs have carried her some considerable distance from the all-important spot does she rise into the air to challenge the enemy.

I sometimes think that it is the male bird who sounds the first alarm, and that the female is indeed on the nest all the while, watching one's approach anxiously, and taking advantage of the moment when one's attention is occupied by her mate, to slip away unobserved. The only time when a curlew really sits tight is during the highly critical period immediately before the young chip shell. Surprisingly little incubation is sufficient, it would seem, and the eggs are frequently left uncovered for long intervals without suffering any ill effects. Indeed, to achieve the great end, the curlew, like the divers, appears to trust almost as much to the early May sun and the peculiarly fecund warmth of the swamp as to the heat of her own body.

Of the nests which actually come to light, a far greater number are found by accident than by the most careful searching. The latter, indeed, merely amounts to so much labour lost, as a rule, unless one's efforts are limited to a very circumscribed area. A local farmer's son was particularly anxious to procure some curlew's eggs, but for years had searched in vain, though several pairs nested near. One day, his father chanced upon a nest on his own land, but, knowing nothing about the egg-hunt, left it undisturbed. Upon hearing of it, the son immediately set off, but could not find the nest, nor was the farmer, when called in to assist, able to show it to him. Pressure of work prevented a thorough search

at the moment, and when a day or two later their joint efforts proved successful, it was only to find that some hungry prowler—probably a poaching dog—had forestalled them.

Upon another occasion, aided by other young hopefuls, I well remember scouring a small bog for a nest known to be in the locality, and though every yard of ground was examined, as we thought, no success rewarded our efforts. It happened, however, that one of the party dropped a knife, and returning a day or two later to look for it, walked straight into the nest. The young birds had just slipped shell, and only an addled egg remained whose history will scarcely bear publication.

Towards midsummer young curlews may be encountered anywhere. Last summer one was brought to me for identification under somewhat unusual circumstances. It was caught by a chauffeur, who found it sitting disconsolately beside a road along which it had obviously been chased by another motorist. One might have supposed that a wild young curlew would have found the interior of a large saloon car somewhat terrifying, but he accepted his unaccustomed position with quaint philosophy, and upon arrival at my door was perched calmly upon the back seat as though perfectly conversant with the entire proceeding.

When taken out, his resigned behaviour was curious. A young house-sparrow in such a case would have chirruped and struggled. The curlew on the contrary did neither. There was nothing spasmodic in the grip of his long toes around my forefinger; while even the action of his heart scarcely exceeded

its normal pulsations. It is usually so. The wilder the bird, the more tractable when captive. An eagle is more easily tamed than the titmouse that comes to one's window; and while the imprisoned mountain fox feeds and thrives, the semi-domesticated rabbit of the home meadows pines and dies if confined for many days in the very summerhouse under which he has frequently burrowed.

The young bird being uninjured, the obvious course was to restore him to the place where he had been found. What were his impressions, one wonders, as his quaint gawky legs carried him swiftly away amongst the bracken? How did he account for his escape? And how much of that strange adventure does he remember as he sails with his fellows above the wide marshes? Does he think of the car in which he rode as a strange animal that swallowed him, and from whose hungry maw he escaped by miraculously good fortune? Or has it all passed from his mind like a bad dream?

According to Rowe, the great family of wading birds is represented upon Dartmoor by almost every species belonging to this order. In reality few members of the race breed or even occur upon ground that can strictly be described as "Forest". The "horniwick", as old Devonians termed the lapwing, nests upon many outlying marshes; the sandpiper in most districts, while the woodcock may be flushed in brushy coombes at an earlier date than upon the lowlands. The principal nesting-species of this order, however, is unquestionably the snipe, which breeds in considerable numbers upon almost any extensive mire. The snipe is almost

universally regarded as fair game by the moormen, and, although it may not legally be shot without a certificate, it stands little chance nowadays upon the commons. Like the woodcock, the species occupies a somewhat anomalous position. It is not game, and may therefore be taken in snares without breach of the law even by uncertificated persons. The snaring of such birds is now virtually a lost art, however, and one trusts that it will never be revived. Practically every snipe or woodcock that comes to hand nowadays is either caught in a spring trap or shot—in the latter case unlawfully as often as not, although in this neighbourhood I have only once heard of a man being arraigned for such an offence, the case in question ending in a somewhat peculiar manner. When the bird was produced in Court, no shot-mark of any kind could be found upon it, and for lack of this final evidence no conviction could be established.

The popularity of snipe-shooting appears to extend to sportsmen of all classes. "Set me on a great expanse of marsh where snipe abound", wrote Major Harding Cox, when defining his idea of that frequently misapplied term "sport", and the majority of keen shooting men who can appreciate difficult game would, I think, endorse the sentiment. It is with much regret, therefore, that the gradual but none the less certain decline of the bird's status in the West Country is noted from year to year. Off the actual moors, there has been a decided scarcity of snipe throughout Devonshire as a whole, and this apparently has not been confined entirely to the West. It was somewhat significant that last

season's bag upon a famous Suffolk shoot included one snipe only out of a total of 8,221 head. This scarcity, needless to point out, is not necessarily general, and in certain localities one may hear very different accounts. Upon the whole, however, the status of the bird appears to be unsatisfactory rather than otherwise.

The snipe is a decided feature of the countryside, and more particularly of the moorland, where its curious call-notes, varied according to the season, but ever distinctive, may be heard throughout the year. There is one peculiar cry which I have always attributed to the snipe, though to my knowledge it has never been recorded. An attempt to produce a bird-cry upon paper serves little purpose as a rule, for even if accomplished to the writer's satisfaction, it seldom conveys much to the reader. In this particular case, if one could strike a harsh bubbling note, somewhere between a frog's croak and the far-sounding "crake" of the landrail, it might be possible to get a tolerably accurate impression of this sound, which the snipe appears to utter when it believes itself to be alone upon its marshy haunt. I have heard it more than once when lying quietly in the heather, and was quite at a loss to account for it until careful observation left little doubt as to its source.

Three varieties of snipe occur in this island. The great snipe may be ruled out, so far as the West Country is concerned, his range being practically limited to the Eastern Counties where he is an occasional autumn visitor. Next in order comes the familiar little bird of all our marshes, the only resi-

dent variety, and, third in the list, his even smaller cousin, the silent, elusive little jack-snipe, who comes as a winter guest to most parts of the country, arriving mysteriously after the manner of migrants, when the first snows cover the higher grounds of Northern Europe. His minute size (little more than seven inches in length) easily serves to distinguish him. In general habits there is little difference between the two latter species, the jack-snipe being perhaps less erratic in its comings and goings, and more faithful to favourite localities. It is nearly impossible to drive him from any spot that has taken his fancy. There is an old stock story of a country gentleman, very fond of the gun but an execrable shot, who was one day found lamenting over a jack-snipe that he had brought down. When asked the reason for his grief, and why he had fired at the bird unless desirous of killing it, he replied that the snipe, now dead in his hand, had provided him with an entire winter's sport. It could be found any day upon a little marsh not far from his house, and whenever he wanted a shot, he had only to go there and flush it. He had discharged both barrels at it more times than he could remember, and now, by sheer mischance, he had killed it, and all hope of further sport was over in consequence.

Of all the bird voices that may still be heard upon the high moor, there is not a call which conveys a stronger appeal than the sweet, plaintive whistle of the golden plover, or the "whistling plover" as he is appropriately named by the country-folk. To many people, no doubt, this fascinating bird is but a voice, unclassified, and as elusive as that of the fabled



*Wandergeist*, mingling, perhaps, with the sea-bird's scream, or heard in the stillness of night at migration time. Others, again, take a purely sporting interest in his comings and goings, while an even greater number know him only as the choicest of table-birds, procured from the poulterer with little thought about his life story or the manner of his death. The golden plover, indeed, is not a bird that comes everybody's way, his being a wild as well as a wandering spirit, and they who make his acquaintance must seek him in the wild places to which he belongs, and of which he forms so essential a feature.

This bird's main breeding-grounds are the wilds of Arctic Europe, though a considerable number of nests may be found on the Derbyshire and Yorkshire moors, throughout the Highlands, and northwards to the Hebrides. The species is resident in many parts of Ireland, but, as far as Great Britain is concerned, it rarely, if ever, nests south of the grouse line. Upon Dartmoor, its great stronghold in the West, it ranks as a winter visitor only, and even as the curlew's call heralds the spring, so the tuneful whistle of the plover, sounding from the hills when the bracken is reddening, may be regarded as a certain sign of winter's nearness. The note, indeed, is occasionally heard as early as mid-September, when large flocks may be observed either upon the wing or resting quietly on some high ridge, from which they rise, when flushed, with obvious reluctance. These birds, however, are merely travellers, bound for more southern lands, who linger for a while in suitable localities, probably awaiting favourable winds before proceeding towards the Mediterranean. Of the birds

which winter upon the Devonshire uplands, the first flights arrive early in October, and formerly their coming was eagerly awaited by amateur and professional sportsmen alike. Incidentally, the "professional sportsman" of the old type must have done well "when the plovers came". Eightpence was about the price obtained per head in the local markets, and as forty or fifty birds frequently fell to one gun in the course of a day, irrespective of other game, the calling appears to have been tolerably remunerative. Now, according to the old moormen, "it isn't a bit the same", and the flocks or "wings", to use the old technical term, which one sees to-day cut a sorry figure when compared numerically with the teeming multitudes of former years. "I have seen", wrote the late Mr. E. T. Daubeny, "vast companies, each of which must have numbered as many as thirty thousand birds," whereas nowadays one would look with considerable surprise at a flock numbering as many hundreds. But, however that may be, the bright little northerners still come, and doubtless will continue to do so for many seasons yet, though never again, I fear, in the "exceeding great flocks" described by writers of long ago.

From a bird-lover's point of view there is no finer spectacle than a large flight of plover under full headway. The soul-stirring thunder of wings and the wild free tumult of cries are sufficiently impressive, but it is the marvellous uniformity of time and action that above all things stamps itself upon the mind's eye with unforgettable vividness. A thousand birds appear to have but one mind between them. Or, more literally, their movements would

seem to be governed by a common impulse, which enables them to execute the most bewildering evolutions with an orderly precision at which one never ceases to marvel. By what mysterious agency, one wonders, are the numberless changes rung? How is every bird informed of the psychological moment at which to swerve, cant, sweep round in a breathless circle, or surrender itself to the wind to be whirled through space, still-winged and at a terrifying speed? So far as one can judge, there is no signal given, no word of command. There is only that wonderful unity of purpose for which the most ingenious theory as yet advanced has entirely failed to account.

Of my own impressions, the most memorable was obtained one bright spring morning when crossing a high shoulder of Fur Tor, accompanied by John Bennett. As I write, the whole scene returns in vivid detail—the brown, billowy wastes of heather and whortleberry across which the cloud-shadows were coursing; the little Scotch sheep which fled like deer at our approach, the grotesque, rugged outline of the Tor with its raven-topped pinnacles towering like the ruins of some giant castle against the April sky, and immediately before us a burned and arid slope where a lark could scarcely have found cover.

My companion was relating an interesting tale of old forest life, when a gunshot ahead there sounded an unmistakable call-note which was echoed instantly from every quarter of the heath, and all within the same second, as it seemed, a fine flock of golden plover, many hundreds strong, was on the wing. The birds circled once or twice over the ridge, as

though to take their bearings, after which they were heading straight away, when the man beside me gave a clear plover-like whistle, whereupon we had the satisfaction of seeing the entire flock wheel like one bird and come sweeping back in our direction. Far larger flights are seen, of course; mightier aeronauts may create a more imposing pageant; none the less, there was something about this fine company in full wedding-dress, black and gold and evanescent in the noonday sunlight, hurtling downwind to the tune of whirring pinions and a babel of eager, questioning cries, which, in my own case, at any rate, created an unforgettable impression. We crouched low among the rocks and the flock passed over us, only to wheel again as once more the deluding whistle sounded; and so they continued to sweep backwards and forwards for several minutes, gradually mounting to a height so great that the eye could no longer follow their evolutions.

"They are turble false birds," Bennett remarked to me upon another occasion, and he spoke upon the strength of experience unequalled upon Dartmoor. "False", it should be remarked, in this case does not imply infidelity, or the common interpretation of the word in any sense whatsoever. In old Devon parlance it merely stands for craft or guile, and the speaker used the term when describing some of the difficulties which he encountered in circumventing the wily plover of long ago. The particular incident which occasioned the remark was as follows. For several seasons he had been on the track of a large flock, which, during the winter months, rested daily on the western slope of Hangingstone, the hump-

backed, peaty mountain which overlooks the wilds of Dart Head. So difficult was the approach, however, that the wary game invariably took alarm long before he could get within range, and year after year passed without his getting a single shot at them. At last, in sheer desperation he hit upon a plan, and early in the season, with much patience and labour, he set to work to cut a lane through the peat which by insidious windings approached and commanded the high plateaux where the birds mainly alighted. The undertaking involved some subterfuge, it being necessary to hoodwink certain kindred spirits who haunted the moor during those mellow autumn days in search of black-game, and who would not scruple, as he well knew, to take advantage of his labours, even to the extent of forestalling him. For the benefit of such gentry he allowed it to be understood that his work was in connection with the artillery practice, which fiction obtained the more ready credence as he was known to undertake certain duties on the ranges. He carried out his design, waited until a considerable number of birds were "in", then, one misty morning, by means of his trench, crept into the very heart of the flock and gave the dismayed birds the full benefit of both barrels as they rose.

He only did it once, however, and therein lay the "falseness" of which he complained. Taking warning from signal disaster, not only the flock actually concerned, but all succeeding flights ever after forsook the place, frequenting instead the more exposed ridges where they were entirely free from surprise. "That was twelve years ago," he said, when

concluding the story, "and I have never seed a plover there since."

Upon the day which he considers to have yielded the best sport of his life, his total bag amounted to fifty plover, two hares, nine snipe, and three brace of partridges—a fine performance for one gun walking the heather with no other assistance than a setter. During that season his bag of plover alone upon many occasions exceeded the "half-hundred" in a day, and so great was his success that the local markets proved unable to cope with the supply of birds.

When in pursuit of plover he once scored a distinctly unusual right and left. He had marked down "a brave covey" in an open place which could be approached by no means other than by creeping along one of the many heathery trenches or leats, these being the tracks of ancient waterways, cut perhaps centuries ago for mining operations. The trench being shallow, it was necessary to proceed upon all-fours—no easy matter when carrying a gun. He managed it, however, crawled to within what he considered a fair shooting distance of the birds, and was about to disclose himself, when, reaching forward for the last time, he rested the barrels of his gun squarely upon the back of a hare which was squatting close in the heather. The hare, of course, was up and dashing away long before he had recovered from his astonishment; none the less he found time to scramble to his feet and roll her over before she was out of range. At the sound of the shot the plover, into whose midst he had crept, arose on all sides of him, and he brought down nine with the second barrel.

Like the man with the punt-gun, the professional sportsman appears to fire into the "brown" of a flock as a matter of course, his one object being to procure as many birds as possible. It is not a commendable practice, but the actual cruelty is perhaps somewhat exaggerated. True, a certain number of birds get away "pricked", but there can be little doubt that the percentage would compare favourably with the corresponding total were other methods employed. This applies to wild fowl of every description. A popular notion prevails that a "good shot" either kills or misses his bird, and that it is the bungler who wounds. This, I fear, holds good only to a very limited extent. Indeed, it is rather the reverse of the truth. Curious as it may seem, the consistently bad shot seldom offends in this way. As a rule his ineffective shooting is due to some chronic fault, usually a tendency to aim too high, a clean miss being the common result of his efforts. On the other hand, few birds escape untouched from a really first-class marksman. His eye is too true, his timing too accurate, and though he may err upon occasions, like anyone else, or may be deceived to some extent by a sudden turn or variation of pace, he is still tolerably sure of being somewhere thereabouts. Again, a great deal depends upon the angle of a bird's flight, which in many cases makes a dead shot nearly impossible, and, even lacking any such handicap, unless the object happens to be comparatively near, there is always the possibility of the pellets failing to reach a vital spot, in which case strong fliers like the golden plover, mallard, or woodpigeon, though hard hit, may carry on for a

considerable distance. All considered, therefore, from a humane point of view there is little to choose between "browning" and the most careful selection of one's bird, though sentiment naturally inclines towards the more sportsmanlike course. One might add that the principle of "aiming forward", so plausible in theory, is not always practicable, and in the case of skimming birds, flying at a height about level with, and straight away from the gun, it becomes an obvious impossibility.

The "falseness", or in plain English, the wariness of the plover is to some extent offset by the bird's astonishing credulity. I have already described how a whistle resembling the call of one of its members will bring an entire flock back again and again, and, according to Mr. Bowdler Sharpe, it is a common practice in Heligoland to entrap migrating flocks by the same simple means. A wounded bird, after dropping to earth, is very apt to whistle—a pathetic little S O S—and rarely does the call of distress fail to bring back its fellows. Upon this account, the cruel trick of allowing winged birds to remain upon the ground to act as decoys is occasionally advocated, but the end scarcely justifies the means. When flushed, even a single bird seldom omits to sound the alarm note for the benefit of any others that may be within hearing, and when feeding at night, particularly in strange country, they make frequent use of a low piping call, presumably for the purpose of keeping in touch with one another. Incidentally, I have noticed that sporting dogs recognize the plover's whistle even at a considerable distance, and can distinguish it from the curlew's call, the



crying of sea-birds, and even the note of the sand-piper.

Unlike its congeners, the golden plover is essentially a bird of high altitudes. Bleak moorland and wild mountain-sides constitute its chosen habitat, and severe must be the winter that compels it to forsake the uplands. Night is its principal feeding-time, when, under cover of darkness, a large proportion of the moor birds descend to cultivated fields, alighting for choice upon newly sown lands, or fields of young corn. Like curlews, they display a marked preference for certain localities, and being conservative birds, are not easily expelled from their favourite haunts. Even the reclaiming of moorland, as a rule so fatal to its avifauna, seldom appears to drive away the plover, and as long as they can find conditions suitable to their economy, the wild birds remain true to immemorial custom, and return year after year, regardless of persecution.

During hard weather, or when winter is far advanced, they fly long distances in search of food, and on still nights it is nothing unusual to hear them in districts where they are entirely unknown by day. An "in-country" farmer, knowing my interest in Natural History, once told me about some strange birds, "partridge-natured things", he called them, which "made a funny old noise" and followed him about like chicken when he went the nightly round of his ewes. They came, he said, after the "lambs' meat", by which he did not mean mutton, but the waste oats, cake, or root pulp, littered round the feeding-troughs, "meat" standing for anything edible in West-Country dialect. From his descrip-

tion I had no doubt that the birds were golden plover, and was glad to accept an invitation to accompany him one night upon his round, and see the strange visitors for myself.

The night fixed proved propitious, being overcast, still and mild, ideal both for sound and for the vivid contrast essential to make lantern-light effective. When we entered the field, all seemed quiet. On some rising ground the sheep were resting, a huddle of dim forms, ghost-white in the gloom ; not another living thing, as far as one could see or hear, stirred in the old pasture, but as my companion swung his lantern round, flashing its rays into all parts of the field, there was a sudden rush of wings, and in a moment the air seemed full of whistling plover wheeling excitedly about in the bright circle of light.

There was a curious unreality about the scene which can be better imagined than described—the beautiful wild birds, looking unnaturally big and white as they swept to and fro across the lighted area ; the weird cries and the rapid winnowing of pinions that filled the surrounding darkness, rendered all the more effective by the occasional transient gleam of a silver breast, or the turn of a wing flashing back some chance ray of the lantern ; but at the moment the astonishing fearlessness displayed by the birds dwarfed every other impression. I should hesitate to say how near they came, but it occurred to me afterwards that my companion had struck at more than one of them with his stick. Neither could one do more than guess at the number of birds or the length of the performance. It might have been a matter of either seconds or minutes that we stood

there while they circled about us, for time always seems long upon such occasions, and the flock may have mustered anything from fifty to a hundred. Many or few, however, they did not appear to be at all alarmed at our presence, and after a while, having exhausted the wonder of the light, they took ground again at the farther end of the field, where, with the aid of the lantern, they could be seen running or rather creeping about as long as we cared to watch them.

All considered, whatever may be said to the contrary, there can be no doubt that far too heavy a toll has been taken of the golden plover upon Dartmoor within recent years, and unless a season or two of close and really efficient protection is granted to the bird, its status in this part of the country will soon become negligible. It is quite true that the species is in no immediate danger of extermination and considerable numbers may still be seen in many districts. A local rabbit-trapper tells me that one morning last winter he found "three o' they whistling plovers" in his gins—a somewhat unusual occurrence, the golden plover being one of the few birds that one is apt to consider as more or less safe from the trapper's activities. The traps were set alongside a high hedgerow, under which the flock must have alighted.

Allground birds have numerous enemies with which to contend, but Nature in many respects has been kind to the plover, providing both young and adult birds with a plumage so admirably adapted to the conditions in which they live that they can become invisible almost at will. As spring advances, the pure white

waistcoat, which during the upland winter has enabled the wearer either to vanish into a snow-storm or to crouch in safety upon a bare hillside, indistinguishable from the scattered stones, for the most part disappears, giving place to a sooty black, which, relieved in its turn by the perennial splashes and edgings of golden brown, is in perfect harmony with the moorland vegetation. It requires a very keen pair of eyes to detect a squatting plover, and this wonderful colouring doubtless constitutes the bird's main protection against the peregrine, the harrier, and the more rapacious but less-agile raven with whom I will deal in the succeeding chapter.

## CHAPTER XI

### DARTMOOR'S GRIM RAVEN

IN the mythology of all ages, *Corvus corax*, the raven, occupies a unique position. Even in these coldly prosaic days, when Natural History shows a strong tendency to develop into little more than a matter of statistics and records, there is something in his very name that stirs the pulses, conveying one in imagination from the homely charm of the characteristic English landscape to wild rock-bound coasts and breezy mountain-tops, where that deep impressive voice from the blue still proclaims the "solitary reign" of this sombre and most despotic monarch of the rocks. To the raven there still attaches a measure of the romantic glamour which invested the Berserkers of old, whose banners he so appropriately adorned, and with him, should he ever go, there will pass one of the most arresting figures that ever strengthened the somewhat limited avifauna of this island.

When reviewing the position of the English raven to-day, it might be interesting to quote a few extracts from the remarks of earlier writers, from whose figures some decidedly satisfactory comparisons may now be drawn. In his *Birds of Our Rambles*, published in 1891, Charles Dixon writes :

In times within the memory of living men, the raven was a regular dweller in the woods, but gamekeepers and cultivation have at last proved too much for him, and these places know him no more.

A later passage from the same work reads as follows :

It is also on the sea-cliffs that the nest of the raven may now almost only be found. Few and far between are the ravens' nests round English coasts.

Again in Hudson's revised edition of *Birds and Man*, published nearly a quarter of a century later, we find references to ravens formerly recorded in many English counties, and to various historic pairs that had ceased to exist within the author's knowledge. He also alludes to the "extermination" of the species in Somerset, mentioning a season in which a head-keeper upon the Forest of Exmoor was paid for fifty-two ravens shot and trapped. He concludes with the statement :

At present one may go from end to end of the county which is a long one and find no raven, though in very many places from North Devon to the borders of Gloucestershire one would find accounts of "last ravens".

It is somewhat remarkable that, for once, the rare birds whose complete banishment was so nearly a *fait accompli*, should have falsified expert predictions, justifiably pessimistic. Far from the raven's "ancient place in the woodlands knowing him no more" one could now find several pairs nesting within big woods in this neighbourhood, and I have little doubt that as many more could be located without undue effort in various districts throughout the county, while eyries around the south-west coast have lately multiplied to an extent beyond the hopes

of the most sanguine bird-lover of the 'nineties. Somerset naturalists, again, I venture to think, would be surprised if informed that their raven population now consisted only of the two pairs to which, in Hudson's opinion, it had been reduced in 1915.

The same writer also deplored the passing of that aristocratic institution, the raven-tree, which, together with the birds that occupied it, not so long ago lent additional distinction to many a fine old park or timbered domain. In face of the unprecedented changes wrought by modern conditions, Hudson's comment upon this passage strikes one as particularly curious :

the wide domains, the large timber, and the ancient families survive, but the raven has vanished.

How, one wonders, would he have greeted the complete reversal of the position that the ensuing decade was destined to witness—the raven in many cases returning to his own ; the disintegration of historic estates ; the crumbling of ancient institutions ?

The fact of the raven's return to several of his former haunts remains, however, incontestable, and there are few people who will not be gratified to know that the fine species is no longer in danger of extinction. On the contrary, its numerical status has shown a decided improvement within the last few years, and, speaking for the Cornish Peninsula, the bird is unquestionably extending its breeding range, not only along the sea-board, but among the rocky and densely wooded inland coombes wherever it can find conditions suitable to its somewhat pronounced requirements.

"Bird of the Wilderness", as he has become through the force of circumstances, the social side of the raven's nature is still revealed by the affection which undoubtedly exists between mated pairs, and the manner in which the family party remains intact long after the young birds have acquired the full use of their wings. In this respect, as in many others, there is something remarkably human about him despite his ferocious reputation, and those who talk of the ruthless methods employed by an old pair when dispersing the brood have never watched the dark family circling above their native hills when all domestic responsibilities are at an end, and there is ample time to enjoy the freedom of limitless sunny skies with light winds and cirrus clouds for play-fellows.

One is sometimes inclined to wonder whether the raven has in reality been driven to seek final refuge upon the mountains and inaccessible cliffs, or are these birds merely the survivors and offspring of an original stock which always occupied such places, having acquired a mastery over those forces which so nearly effected the extermination of their race? However that may be, the birds appear to have discovered that their one chance lies in establishing their eyries as far as possible from human habitation, and the wild solitary character of their chosen haunts only serves to enhance their attraction.

Perhaps the wildest and most lonely tract of country in England to-day is that which lies between the head-waters of the Dart and Tavy, an unfrequented and trackless region of mist and bog, rich in the austere beauty of rugged tor, heather slope



and mountain stream, but dour and desolate beyond description. There are more picturesque parts of the country, and grander views may be obtained from many of our northern mountain-tops, but the wide panorama of lake and crag and dale, viewed from the summit of some high Westmorland peak, comprises more often than not a large proportion of cultivated country. Snowdon has long submitted to the indignity of a light railway, while the ascent of Helvellyn is now indicated, not only by discarded bottles and orange-peel, but by an elaborate line of stone-heaps, collected by some beneficent but unimaginative society. The grim old hills which frown upon the gloomy morasses around Tavy Head command no vista of impressive mountain scenery, but keen must be the human eye that from their summits can detect "pathway or cultivated land". Wild rare birds still haunt these hills, but the most distinguished as well as the most constant partner of their loneliness is the raven. His sinister voice is one of the commonest, and frequently the only sound that awakes their echoes, and from their rocky summits which constitute his watch-towers he mounts jealous guard over their privacy, challenging the intruder, whether feathered, furred, or human, and keeping a watchful eye over the mountain flocks for his own dark purposes.

In the heart of this wild region there stands Fur Tor, as fine a hill as any within the British Isles. Flanked by grey boulders and clustering ling, and surmounted by a precipitous pile of castellated rock, it rears its crest nearly two thousand feet above sea-level. The huge tor bears a grotesque resemblance

to an aquiline human face, and upon a rough ledge which represents the upper lip, imparting the appearance of a ragged moustache, there rested for a time a great nest which was surely one of the most remarkable in existence.

Birds, one naturally supposes, have no eye for effect, yet the ravens who selected this most unique of building sites could scarcely have chosen a spot more picturesque or appropriate. And what a nursery for the young freebooters, when they sat upon that ledge through the warm spring days with the wide silent moors around them, their growing plumes ruffled by every breeze from the southern or western seas ; for that gaunt pile of rock must encounter the uninterrupted sweep of the ocean winds from coast to coast. Little wonder that wings first spread from such a cradle should become as tireless and buoyant as the winds themselves, or that voices attuned to no other symphonies than the roar of the tempest should acquire that austerity of tone which renders the raven's call among all others unmistakable.

To my knowledge, no human eye ever looked into that romantic eyrie. Its position was at best almost inaccessible, while the spring gales, continuously blowing across that bleak and lofty summit, rendered any attempt to reach the nest too difficult upon every occasion when I visited it. I doubt whether three people knew of its existence, and by others it will never now be seen, for the same wild winds which for so long effectually guarded its contents even from friendly inspection, have since scattered it to every quarter of the compass during the abnormal winter

storms of 1929, and the birds have as yet made no effort to rebuild it.

Those destructive late-winter gales were also responsible for the obliteration of another raven "monument", in this case an abandoned structure, so firmly anchored in a patriarchal tree that one had come to regard the big nest as almost a part of the wood itself. The nest in question was an interesting relic, being the original site of the now well-known Skaigh eyrie, since established in a huge spruce near by. As I write, the wrathful voices of the birds who occupy this eyrie come to me across the intervening moorland as though in protest against further notoriety, in spite of which I will venture to add a few points in connection with their latest history.

Though assailed upon all sides by enemies, of which Sir Herbert Maxwell's "cursed collector" has proved the most troublesome, these birds—thanks mainly to the zealous protection granted to them by Mr. Ormston Pease, the owner of the wood in which they nest—have not only contrived to preserve their own lives, but have undoubtedly succeeded in restocking the surrounding country over which they ranged in solitary state not so many years ago. For a long while the problem as to what became of the young birds, successfully reared, but invariably disappearing in midwinter, remained unsolved. Now, however, several new eyries have sprung into being within a radius of ten miles or so, and it seems probable that in the near future each parish in this part of the county will be able to boast of its "resident ravens". The nearest of these new breeding-places has been established in a wooded valley some three

miles away from the parent eyrie, and curiously enough, an odd hen who for some years attended and watched over the fortunes of the "ancestral home", now appears to divide her attention between the two eyries.

The presence of this odd bird at the Skaigh nest a year or two ago gave rise to a somewhat interesting problem which has never been satisfactorily solved. The nest being completed during bitter weather towards the end of February, the business of laying began upon March 1st, when I found the first egg frozen to the nest. A week later the clutch consisted of six, after which the birds appeared to have settled down to the serious task of incubation, and more than a fortnight had passed when John Bennett, commissioned to keep an eye upon the place for the purpose of warning off the indefatigable clutch-snatcher, reported to me that the birds seemed ill at ease, and he feared that in spite of his vigilance the nest had been tampered with. This being only too probable, I again climbed to the nest and looked over its rim, in the full expectancy of finding it denuded of its contents. What was my astonishment, therefore, when, far from wool-lined emptiness, a mountain of eggs confronted me, deposited one upon another in such numbers that they lay in cone formation, and so placed that they could scarcely fail to defeat any effort at incubation.

Twelve eggs had been laid in the nest, and my first thought was to suspect trickery. The possibility that some mischievous village youth, not daring to annex the clutch, had "got his own back" by filling the nest with crows' eggs offered the most

likely solution, only to be discountenanced by the discovery that the monstrous clutch consisted of ravens' eggs only. This disposed of the practical joke possibility, the eggs of a raven being neither easily obtained nor so readily sacrificed. A suggestion that the first clutch had been sterilized by the frost seemed worthy of consideration. In that case, however, it was hard to understand why the bird had not ejected the useless eggs, if aware of their unfertility. Failing this, there only remained the supposition that the third bird had added a by no means modest contribution to the already ample supply, and the fact that the later eggs were far paler in colour lent countenance to the "second hen" theory. There also remained the problem as to the best policy to adopt. To let matters take their course was out of the question, the "mistress of the mansion" having declined to accept such extensive responsibilities. After consultation with Mr. Pease, we decided to remove two or three of the surplus eggs, leaving as many as would lie flat in the nest. The birds, however, after settling down for a day or two, resolved to reject the compromise. The supposed interloper made no attempt to step into the breach, and the double clutch was spoiled in consequence.

There was some fear that the eyrie would be permanently abandoned on account of this disaster, the more so since very little of the birds was seen during the winter months. As February drew on, however, the dauntless pair again took possession, this time, apparently, unattended by the "hanger-on", who, we supposed, had been banished for her

misdemeanours. In her absence we hoped that matters would resume their customary course and once again March 1st yielded an egg. Ten days later the nest contained three, my inspection of which being hailed with such vociferous protest, that I concluded that the sooty matron had modified her standard and was incubating this trifling clutch; I left her therefore to her good offices with every confidence.

Nearly a month had passed, when, thinking that the young ravens must be ready for inspection, I again toiled up that lofty spruce, the lady of the house taking the same clamorous, and this time fiercely resentful, interest in my movements. That the family had duly arrived I never doubted, until the first expectant glance revealed once more that amazing nestful of eggs, not so many this time, since the clutch could not claim the distinction of double figures, but a clear repetition of history.

Whatever had happened, one thing at any rate was obvious. A second clutch had again been laid, but by whom, and for what purpose, remained, as before, a mystery. Had the second hen returned, captured the position by a *coup de main*, and set up housekeeping upon her own account? If so, what had become of the former mistress? What, again, was the relative position of the two females, and what could be the real history of the "hanger-on"? Is she a widow, recently deprived of her own mate, but still obsessed with the maternal instinct to such a degree that she annexes even another's nest by force, or is she an alternative wife, in which case, is the raven's reputation for monogamy after all a

myth ? In the event of the latter possibility, who builds the nest ? Do all three birds participate, or does the spade work fall upon the lady who has first innings ? It should be remarked that the case of the third bird is not unique, a somewhat similar state of affairs was reported to me from Brent in 1927.

There was naturally some fear that the nest would again be forsaken, but this time the bird in charge had apparently awakened to a due sense of her duties, and when next I ventured to visit the eyrie, the welcome sight of two gaping and newly hatched youngsters rewarded the effort. Not the least noteworthy point in connection with this nest is the fact that no matter how many eggs it contains—and the number has never been less than five—two only “make good”. One would like to know the reason for this. Are these two the only fertile eggs laid, and, if so, which are they ? And in any case why should two invariably prove the lucky number out of so many ? How does it happen, again, that in spite of frequent abstractions, which the utmost vigilance has been unable to prevent, the purloined eggs should never include either of the fertile pair ? This does not appear to be altogether unusual, it should be remarked. A nest on Vixen Tor, destroyed by some person unknown, and therefore unprosecuted, also contained two young birds only, and this was the case with another eyrie seen upon the Dart about the same time.

Between these two nestlings—presumably a “pigeon pair”—a curious contrast in disposition is noticeable, one being precocious, the other shy, from which the obvious conclusions as to sex may

be deduced. It was quaint to notice this difference even in the very young nestlings, one cowering motionless upon the woollen mattress, while the other, stretching itself to its full length—which seemed prodigious—opened a huge and optimistic maw for my edification. As they grow older, both become shy of intruders, and as one approaches the nest, they lie flat upon their backs, apparently feigning death. Later on, however, when the time comes to fly, the bolder spirit is speedily in evidence, and as likely as not will be strong upon the wing before the more timid fledgeling has quitted the nest.

The depth and bulk of a raven's nest to which annual additions have been made over a long period would surprise most people who had not watched its slow development from extremely modest to prodigious proportions. At first little deeper than that of the carrion crow, though considerably broader at the base in view of its more ambitious destiny, it mounts by solid stages, the birds adopting the simple expedient of raising the old wall to the required height, then lining the new work heavily with clay and wool, until the wonderful, basin-like formation of the interior is restored. To such a structure a substantial foundation is indispensable, upon which account the birds appear to prefer a tree eyrie to the less secure hold provided by a cliff ledge with its constant risk of crumbling.

At all times highly individualized, ravens, as I have already remarked, are curiously human birds. Even the famous croak is capable of numberless inflections and variations, from the angry "bark" of the mother bird to the booming and not unmusical



*konk-konk-konk-konk* of an old male when cruising upon still wings a hundred fathoms high in the blue. Among many others, he possesses a means of vocal expression that human ears are seldom privileged to hear. One evening early in the nesting season, anxious to know whether the Skaigh birds were safe and in occupation of the eyrie, I approached the place as cautiously as possible under cover of some tall gorse, and, desiring only to get a view of them, took the opposite side of the River Taw which flows at the foot of the tree. Nothing was in sight, but upon nearing the spot, I became conscious of a sound which bore so striking a resemblance to the human voice that I immediately jumped to the conclusion that egg-hunters were again at work, and regretted that the width of the river, swift and impassable at this point, intervened between myself and the raiders. Doubtful for the moment as to the best course of action, I remained motionless, while distinctly audible above the clamour of the stream, the suppressed guttural sounds continued; but strain my eyes as I might, I could detect no figures upon the farther bank, for which I blamed the failing light. It did not occur to me at the moment to wonder why the ravens, usually so clamorous in the face of danger, were allowing this enemy an unchallenged field. I was too busy endeavouring to catch sight of and, if possible, identify the intruders. Since the interminable conversation continued, however, without anyone becoming visible, I grew weary of waiting, and, thinking to scare the men into disclosing themselves, I stepped suddenly from the cover into plain view. The strange conversation

ceased abruptly, to be succeeded by heavy fluttering overhead, and from the close proximity of the nest—invisible amongst the sombre greenery—there shot the two ravens, to whose confidences I had been an unwitting listener.

Incidentally one rarely gets the opportunity of listening to raven-talk at close quarters, for even when brooding the bird is exceedingly wary and difficult of approach. The standard story of Gilbert White's raven, who remained upon her nest while the tree was actually felled, perishing in the final crash, must strike anyone who knows the bird as strangely un-ravenlike. One cannot but think that the story must have grown with repeated telling, particularly as Mr. White was not himself a witness of the incident. The brooding raven of to-day behaves in a very different manner. At all times wary, nothing can exceed her vigilance upon the nest, even as elsewhere, and far from sitting tight until a tree is chopped down, she is usually off and away before an intruder is even in sight. No matter how guardedly one approaches the eyrie, whether creeping like an Indian through bushes or under cover of darkness, it is very difficult to surprise either the brooding bird or her watchful mate. It is always the same story. Up to a certain point, one appears to be getting along very well. Half an hour of laborious creeping and stalking brings one perhaps within fifty yards of the nest. Its dark bulk is visible through the tree-tops. All seems quiet. There is no apparent reason for supposing that one's approach has been detected, until suddenly, high overhead, there sounds the challenging voice, and

one realizes that both birds are there, sweeping round and round on tireless wings, having dropped, as it seems from the clouds, rather than risen from the tree-tops. They have sensed—for they could not have seen—the danger while it was still far away, and, sliding silently off, the one from her nest, the other from his perch near by, have circled the hill, and, at a safe height, swept back to denounce the intruder. As her task nears its conclusion, the bird certainly sits more closely, but even so, one touch upon the tree suffices to put her off.

In early spring the raven relaxes his attitude of solemn dignity, to participate in a peculiar aerial ceremony, the reason for which remains a complete mystery. Much has been written about the "raven's kiss", while Hudson has very effectively described the fine exhibition of evolutions with which the male bird entertains his brooding mate. All that, however, is mere love-play, in which the exuberance of "a young man's fancy" finds active expression, no more remarkable in its way than somewhat similar displays on the part of the lapwing and snipe. Some naturalists, however, are perhaps unaware that upon certain spring evenings all the ravens within many miles meet, apparently, in mid-air, as though by appointment, high above some remote hilltop, where they remain, as the country-people say, "brave and late", executing weird turns and circlings, croaking in hoarse concert, and doubtless doing many curious and interesting things which the darkness, together with the great altitude at which they hold carnival, prevents one from observing with any accuracy. I once counted fourteen so employed

in the chill of a March sunrise, and could but suspect that the uncanny revellers had "made a night of it", since it seemed improbable that they could have assembled from any distance at so early an hour. Upon another occasion, curiously enough, the same number were observed holding solemn conclave upon the pinnacles of a high rock overlooking the East Okement valley, known appropriately as Raven Tor. It may not, perhaps, be common knowledge that magpies hold a somewhat similar meeting now and again in the February dusk, gathering by scores in some secluded spinney for no other purpose than to confer—a programme carried out with deafening effect.

Grim stories are told of the raven and his alleged attacks upon young and sickly animals, and though these must of necessity be accepted with the proverbial pinch of salt, one is not in a position to discredit such accusations altogether. Admitting the raven's formidable disposition, however, his savage propensities are seldom called into requisition. Like the mountain fox, he might not be averse to killing, should occasion demand, but with so many sheep and cattle dying from natural causes upon the hills, an abundant food supply is always available. Mountain lambs, again, are exceedingly nimble, and jealously protected by hard-headed guardians, thus constituting anything save easy game even to a raven. Dead, they are the lawful prey of all comers—not excepting the dogs that have shepherded them—and rapacious birds and beasts are frequently accused of lamb-murder when in truth they have done no more than accept a feast provided by cir-

cumstances for which they were in no way responsible. In this connection, indeed, the ravens and mountain foxes render signal service, not so much to the sheep-farmers as to the countryside in general, by performing an office which otherwise too often remains unfulfilled.

Ravens must be anything save desirable neighbours from a feathered householder's point of view. It is not so much their amiable habit of carrying away the contents of anybody else's nest to feed their own young that other birds have cause to dread, though the latter is a weighty consideration, no doubt. It is rather their insane jealousy of anything else upon wings that makes their presence so particularly unpleasant for all concerned. Scarcely a day passes during the nesting season without someone getting into trouble. That a pair of ravens will put an eagle to flight is well known, and all comers fare alike. Affairs with crows or magpies are of almost hourly occurrence, but I have never yet been able to witness a passage of arms between the local birds and a heron, for the simple reason that herons appear to give them a very respectful berth. Perhaps they are wise.

The home of a pair of ravens can scarcely hope to remain undiscovered, thanks mainly to the publicity given to it by the owners themselves. In this respect they display an unaccountable lack of discrimination, and, not content with protesting when the nest is actually in danger, must needs thrust themselves into notice by challenging anyone who passes within a quarter of a mile. It is fortunate that another and more protective instinct induces them almost invari-

ably to choose an inaccessible building site. They display considerable originality in this respect, however, and one pair upon the southern side of the Moor have so far departed from custom as to select the big chimney of a disused mine as a curious but perfectly secure nursery.

New breeding-places are frequently reported from remote corners of the hills, but these nests upon investigation usually reveal no more interesting occupants than the ubiquitous carrion crows—a mistake very easily made by the casual observer. Naturalists are apt to be a trifle optimistic, or to jump to desired conclusions somewhat too readily at times, and in correction of a former statement which I made in *Wild Life in Devon*, I am beginning to doubt whether *Corvus corax* ever built in the hawthorns and mountain ashes which overhang the turbulent Dartmoor streams, in spite of tales current in the neighbourhood, and various bulky nests still pointed out to the stranger as those of the “ravven”. Arboreal building sites are rare upon the Moor, and a crow’s nest reared upon the remains of an old one acquires a size which at first sight might well deceive even an experienced eye. Whatever may have happened in days gone by, the raven of to-day is far too knowing to behave in so accommodating a manner.

Two or three years ago, wishing to make sure upon this point, accompanied again by John Bennett I examined practically every possible nesting site upon the northern ranges without success, until at last in a lonely little coombe near Lints Tor we found, as we supposed, the object of our quest. It was a huge nest, newly built, and far too big, we thought, to

have been constructed by the most industrious crow, and its site in a mountain ash, sprouting from a crevice between two big rocks, seemed raven-like enough. Any misgivings that I might have entertained were set at rest by the appearance of two ravens, who, sitting upon a boulder a hundred yards away, croaked their disapproval of both us and our doings, and we left the place convinced that we had made a momentous discovery. When we returned a fortnight later, however, the inevitable crow was sitting comfortably upon five eggs, and there was something particularly irritating in the attitude of the two ravens, who, as before, took an unfriendly though complacent interest in our movements.

Fortunately for the raven, he is not easily destroyed. Excepting in the breeding-season, during which his fatal boldness makes him easy game to anyone unscrupulous enough to take advantage of it, his aloof habits, keen, discriminating eye and wily brain, enable him to steer clear of trap and gun. None the less, even when pursuing his own wary and secluded way, death is apt to meet him at unexpected corners. Not long ago, among some heather on the upper Dart, I came upon a spot where his story had ended, though apart from the identity of the dead bird and more than a suggestion of tragedy, the quiet little hollow in which he lay, revealed no clue to the mystery. There are many ways in which it might have happened, even discounting human agency, for the raven is a warrior bird, for ever at strife with rival monarchs of the air, and at times the thrust of a hostile beak, whether of heron, buzzard, falcon or curlew, may conceivably prove his undoing. The

greatest danger that besets his way, however, is the chance encounter with the human enemy—the fowler upon the winter shore ; the gamekeeper lying in wait at roosting-time ; the pigeon-shooter when the woods are bare, and, last but not least, the casual sportsman, whose path he may cross at any time. One dark wintry afternoon, I was rabbit-shooting with a farmer on the fringe of a wood over which the snow-mist was blowing in blinding squalls. We were awaiting the reluctant movements of the game, which ferrets seemed powerless to dislodge, when my companion suddenly remarked : “ There’s a crow coming over. Shall I shoot him ? ” Being aware of the real damage caused to farmers by the admittedly too numerous *Corvus corone*, I was about to second the dark proposition, when through the mist and deepening gloom of the storm there sounded a well-known voice, and my warning shout was barely in time to arrest the shot which would certainly have closed the history of the Skaigh eyrie.

In early summer, again, before the young birds acquire the full use of their wings, their destruction would present no difficulty. Once, in May, I came upon this same family, in a position which might have proved eminently disastrous to them. The young birds had obviously been taken on a trial trip round the near height of Cosdon Beacon. An adverse wind had sprung up suddenly, as hurricanes have a disconcerting way of doing in any mountainous country, and it had proved too severe a test for the unseasoned wings of the fledgelings. Unable to reach high rocks or trees, a rest upon the open moorland had become necessary when I chanced upon



them. One of the youngsters, still too exhausted to fly any distance, took refuge in a low fir that happened to be near, and there he sat at the end of a slender bough, barely out of reach, indifferent alike to my own efforts to dislodge him and the frantic calls of the old birds. The latter at first behaved with the utmost fearlessness, sweeping round and round barely above the level of the tree, uttering their harsh angry cry, and showing a sublime disregard for danger. At last, however, finding that I did not move off, and that nothing would induce the little one to take wing, they appeared to give up the case as hopeless, and, unable to endure the sight of his capture and destruction—which they doubtless regarded as inevitable—they withdrew to the eyrie half a mile away, where I could hear them calling as birds of a high grade of intelligence only call at times of acute distress. I had barely quitted the place before they were back to see what had occurred and, finding the little one still unharmed, they lost no time in hurrying him away.

Among western sportsmen, and even the better-class farmers, the raven is to a large extent protected by a convention stronger than law or logic. The force of this sentiment can only be appreciated by those who have heard the deep resonant croak to the accompaniment of wind in the pines or in the even more impressive setting supplied by the intense ominous hush that precedes the mountain storm. The superstitious atmosphere which until quite recently invested him in the West has an ancient origin, for according to an old legend, when King Arthur passed "to the great deep" from whence he

came, he did not die, but by enchantment took the form of a raven, in which disguise he still guards these shores until the appointed time when he shall "come again and recover his kingdom". Keen-sighted, watchful and courageous, may the bird long survive to patrol the wind-ways, and guard our high places in his own strange and interesting way.

## CHAPTER XII

### PIRATES OF THE MOOR

As recently as half a century ago, the Dartmoor country is represented as the happy hunting-ground of every rapacious British bird, and even now scarcely a month passes without some rare "occurrence" being recorded, the claims not infrequently soaring to the height of the golden eagle himself. One can only suggest that the shades of the ancient freebooters must return now and again to review the changing conditions, becoming visible at such times to the "gifted ken". In the flesh, the majority of these distinguished *aves* have long abandoned the western hills, and the number of feathered pirates that patrol the heather by day or night is now restricted to a short list indeed.

All considered, one sees fewer birds of prey upon the Moor than elsewhere. Even the rapacious sparrow-hawk as a rule shuns the barren upland, where the cover is insufficient for his methods of hunting. He nests in all the wooded coombes, however, particularly in the little larch spinneys that sprinkle the slopes of the outlying hills, and one often sees him hunting the stone walls of the intakes and hawking around the commons, where he levies considerable toll upon small feathered life. He

seldom ventures beyond the near neighbourhood of woodlands, however, and so far as the open moors are concerned, he usually leaves a clear field to the more ample-winged marauders.

The kestrel is always in evidence, and one can rarely walk for any distance upon the hills without sighting him, suspended as a rule above some high ridge, or quartering the heather for mice and grasshoppers. Even he rarely nests upon the moorlands, though occasionally he tries his luck upon some sheltered tor or quarry cliff. Like the sparrowhawk, he prefers plantations bordering upon cultivated lands, where the housing problem is easily solved by the abundance of magpies' nests for the possession of which he occasionally does battle with the lawful owners.

Away in the wildest recesses of the hills the merlin is still frequently seen, and there can be little doubt that it breeds annually somewhere on the great bogs, although no nest has been found to my knowledge upon Dartmoor for many years. Unlike his Exmoor representative, the Dartmoor merlin does not appear to appropriate the abandoned nest of the carrion crow, but builds in the prescribed manner upon the ground, and since the species is exceedingly rare, and the space at the bird's disposal almost unlimited, the difficulty of locating a nest unaided by phenomenal luck is nearly insurmountable.

Very similar to that of the merlin is the position of the hen-harrier. This interesting bird has certainly returned to the district during the last two or three seasons, but so wide is its range that the task of re-establishing it as a breeding species is no light

one. I was first made aware of its reappearance one afternoon when following the bridle-path by way of Skaigh woods to the lower shoulder of Cosdon Beacon. Walking quietly upon the turf, nothing was farther from my thoughts than an encounter with a "rarity", when through a gap in the fence within twenty paces of me there skimmed a light, winged shape which at first glance I mistook for that of a gull. As the stranger sailed out across the wide coombe before me, however, I realized its distinguished identity, and since then, both the male and the female have displayed themselves in the district at frequent intervals. Their breeding-place remains, to date, undiscovered, though, aided by Mr. Walmesley White, I have devoted some considerable time to the search.

It is somewhat curious that the Montagu harrier, which now nests regularly in North Devon, appears to have overlooked the far greater advantages that Dartmoor offers to birds that love solitude and wide spaces. It is the more remarkable since the harriers that breed in the north of the county in all probability pass over the far more rugged and extensive wastes of Mid-Devon before reaching their selected breeding-grounds. It seems probable that even the harriers find the great upheaval of bog and tor too bleak for an ideal nursery, although one would have thought that the unparalleled advantages of utter wildness and immunity from human persecution would have outweighed all other considerations. The fact remains, however, that the high moors are shunned by the majority of birds as breeding-ground, even the ravens, as already mentioned, having aban-



THE HOME OF THE JACKDAWS

*From a water colour painting by Lord Gorell*



doned their eyrie upon Fur Tor, and by the way, another upon the equally wind-swept summit of Links Tor.

Indeed, of all the larger freebooters, the boldest and most persistent builder upon the hills is the carrion crow, which bird, alone of its order, is so tenacious of its "moor rights" that it departs from rule to the extent of placing its nest in the stunted trees and bushes that sprinkle some of the more sheltered hillsides, or overhang the streams. Upon cultivated lands the crow's nest is usually high placed, frequently inaccessible. Upon the Moor as often as not it is within a few feet of the ground, and can even be reached at times without quitting Mother Earth. Indeed, the crows' nests constitute perhaps the most remarkable feature of Dartmoor ornithology, and strangers to the country are frequently amazed at their almost incredible accessibility. A mountain ash provides the most popular site, and there are certain localities, Steeperton Tor, for example, which never fail to produce at least one nest in the course of a season. The Withy-Bush Mires, again, are dotted with characteristic nesting-bushes, and there is a thorn-tree on the Walla Brook which seldom contains less than three structures of varying ages. A favourite bush is used again and again, and in some cases the same nest does duty for two or three seasons in succession, although this is contrary to crow custom. Upon the Moor, even as upon the lowlands, the birds are peculiarly jealous of their own particular localities, and one seldom finds two occupied nests within a mile. To this rule Black Tor Copse provides an exception, and there I



have looked into as many as three tenanted nurseries perched in the crowns of the grey misty little oaks within a hundred yards of one another.

Possibly the short-eared owl occurs occasionally. Its appearances are so rare, however, that its status as a local species may be dismissed as negligible. Latterly, however, the monotonous insistent note of the little owl has become no unusual sound upon the commons and intakes, where numberless cavities in the stone walls provide an ideal habitat for this species. Both naturalists and sportsmen have viewed with some misgivings the firm footing which the little owl has established in the West, even as in other parts of the country. Some years have passed since I first commented upon its unobtrusive invasion of Dartmoor, during which period the sturdy little alien has been steadily consolidating its position.

This species bears a bad name which cannot, one naturally supposes, be entirely unearned. One can scarcely pick up a sporting periodical without coming across some distressing tale of its ravages. It seems remarkable indeed that anything in the way of game or small bird-life can exist with so many pernicious "mighty atoms" at large in the land. In this part of the country, none the less, one is glad to be able to announce that the coming of the destructive little foreigner has not been marked by the catastrophic results that might have been anticipated. Here upon the Moor, at any rate, the bird cannot subsist upon game-chicks, nor have I yet come across any evidence of his depredations amongst the small feathered fry of the heather. Indeed, as far as one

can discover, though little owls are now numerous, they have done no obvious harm, and from their behaviour in this district one is led to suspect that their destructive propensities are rather the result of opportunities thrust upon them in the shape of overstocked coverts—a state of affairs which almost any carnivorous creature may well interpret into an invitation to feast. As a point in this bird's favour I might add an extract from a letter—one of an interesting collection sent to me a few years ago—of the late Rev. E. T. Daubeny, the well-known Norfolk naturalist, who writes :

I have had the ear of the Norfolk County Council as regards the little owl. The contents of a little owl's stomach have been shown to me ; there were the wing-cases of beetles and half a dozen perfect centipedes, and that was all in this particular case : no bones, fur, or feathers. I published the result of the examination, and it saved this species, and doubtless, indirectly, many other owls.

In this district, again, there has been very little evidence of the diurnal depredations which have so largely contributed towards the reputation for mischief acquired by the little owl. So far as can be gathered from my own observation and that of others who have been studying the bird, although his cry may be heard almost incessantly at times, his activities by daylight are not more frequent than those of the barn owl, though, admittedly, he may more readily escape notice, being less conspicuous. Now and again he may be scared out from some evergreen shrub or dark thicket, like any other member of his order, but he appears to spend by far the greater part of the day *underground*, and of

those which have come to hand hereabouts, the majority have been killed by ferrets. A considerable number have been brought to me by trappers, all of which birds, it should be remarked, were taken by night, a fact which, combined with other circumstances, leaves little doubt as to the subterranean habits which these birds have more or less generally adopted. This habit, incidentally, serves to account in a large measure for the rapid increase of the species. The nests in consequence can rarely be pillaged—at least by human enemies—and for that matter the bird has so far attracted such slight notice that few village boys even think of looking for the interesting little white clutch which this owl hides so carefully.

The little owl is also fond of hollow trees, or any other available cavity. Here, however, probably owing to the scarcity of timber, the bird has taken more or less solidly to the banks and walls, and may be seen at dusk squatting at the mouth of a hole, or on the topmost stone of an old wall with a quaint air of proprietorship. In this respect it has indeed only followed the example of its larger relative, the common tawny owl, who “lies aground” a great deal more than is generally supposed. One is often puzzled at the behaviour of ferrets which refuse to enter certain burrows that dogs had declared to be tenanted. This frequently means that some unsuspected occupant bars the way, and, more often than not, it is an owl. Squatting in the passage, blinking, snapping his beak, or menacing with his formidable clawed “fist”, he is a doorkeeper whom many ferrets prefer to leave respectfully alone.

Whether the little owl ever avails itself of another bird's nest is a question that I have had no opportunity of solving. There is no reason why it should not do so, since almost all birds of prey of the smaller varieties conform at times to this habit. That a great deal more will be known about the bird in course of time is probable, for, desirable or otherwise, the little owl appears to have come to stay. Whatever its character, one is inclined to welcome the assurance that any bird is upon the increase these days. Few are so bad that their presence offers no compensation, and in the little owl's case I cannot but think that his evil propensities have been somewhat exaggerated.

Conspicuously associated with the earliest records of Dartmoor avifauna, there has always been the buzzard, which, though not essentially a moor bird, nesting as often as not a good many miles from the hills, nevertheless constitutes one of the most characteristic features of the moorland scenery. I have seen as many as nine of the big hawks cruising in stately circles around a high point, and their wild wailing is as common a sound upon the hills as the raven's croak or the plover's whistle. Not so long ago, the localities frequented by this beautiful bird were so far removed from the beaten tracks that only a limited number of people enjoyed the opportunity of observing the big hawk in its natural setting. In this respect, however, as in many others, the last decade or so has wrought incalculable changes, and the almost incredible influx of tourists into the Wilds of the West has invested the last strongholds of the buzzard with a publicity which,

from the bird's point of view, can only be regarded as disastrous.

The buzzard, indeed, together with so many of our rarer *aves*, has found good cause within the last few years to cry "save us from our friends", for it is the modern naturalist who is indirectly developing into the bird's worst enemy. With his sworn and more or less natural foe, the gamekeeper, he has always had to contend, and in every case has fought a losing battle, for the conspicuous habits of the bird, together with his remarkable boldness during the nesting season, render him far too easy a prey to anyone who contrives his destruction. This is evident from the fact that the buzzard is seldom seen in districts where game-rearing is carried on to any appreciable extent. From the greater part of England he has long been banished, and only in remote corners of the country where conditions have remained more or less wild and natural, has this fine species been able to hold its own. The Great War, again, provided the buzzard with a badly needed respite, and so well did the bird avail itself of the truce, that it extended its range considerably in many directions. This, however, was not all to the good. Its appearance in more closely preserved and cultivated country was viewed with disfavour by farmers and game-preservers. Despite the "whole-time" protection which the big hawks enjoyed, too many received short shrift, and the bird-lover's dream of buzzards once again established throughout the country ended, after the usual manner of dreams, in disillusionment. The advance for the most part has been rudely checked, and with the

buzzard to-day it is a case of "as you were". The bird now occupies much the same position that it enjoyed some years ago, and in spite of inevitable assertions to the contrary, there is no indication of a real or general increase of its numbers throughout the West Country.

So much then for the natural enemies of the buzzard, if one may use the expression in such a sense. Unfortunately, however, as I have already hinted, the matter no longer ends with the keeper or the farmer, apprehensive—justly or otherwise—for his lambs or poultry. The "booming" of the buzzard country has brought an influx of wolves in sheep's clothing, or, in other words, the inevitable army of collectors and ornithologists, thirsting for specimens or "information", and between the insatiable greed of the one and the too-often misguided enthusiasm of the other, the buzzard's nest that escapes molestation must be remote indeed. The up-to-date collector, it should be observed, like everyone else at the present time, has enlarged the standard of his requirements. The schoolboy of twenty years ago was content to possess at most one pair of the eggs of any rare species. It was considered a point of honour, unless under exceptional circumstances, never to deplete a clutch to such an extent that the bird might be expected to forsake the nest in consequence. The modern collector, on the contrary, grabs the entire clutch as a matter of course—needless to say, advancing plausible reasons in excuse of the policy—and not satisfied with the contents of one nest, must needs acquire a collection, not of eggs, but of *clutches*, for the important purpose

of making measurements and drawing infinitesimal comparisons. In this connection one cannot do better than repeat the words of the late Richard Kearton, who, when introducing his *At Home with Wild Nature*, addressed himself to the clutch-snatcher as follows :

To the too ardent egg-collector, and especially the clutch enthusiast, whose appetite is insatiable, I would say : " For Heaven's sake have mercy ". All that can be known or is worth knowing in regard to variation in the coloration and markings of British birds' eggs has already been discovered, and there is but little room in that direction for originality. Try old china or worm-eaten furniture, and give the poor birds a chance. In all conscience they need it, and there are still some people about who delight in their sweet songs and charming ways.

In the closing sentiment, indeed, he strikes a note to which lovers of wild Nature can scarcely fail to respond. The pursuit of " information " is eminently desirable up to a certain point, but there is too great a tendency at the moment to sacrifice the substance to the shadow. After all, it is the birds that are wanted over and above statistics concerning them, and the majority of us would prefer to watch one buzzard executing its peerless evolutions high above the tree-tops, rather than study the most scientifically compiled diagram illustrating the different markings and measurements of fifty pilfered eggs.

The clutch enthusiast is not, however, the only wolf that preys upon the wild-bird fold. There is the well-meaning but almost invariably harmful type of observer who usually contrives to make other and more dangerous men considerably wiser than

himself. And again, we have the equally well-intentioned but officious "naturalist" who is unable to leave anything undisturbed, or to resist the temptation to make interesting experiments. A few years ago a pair of buzzards made their nest in a wood belonging to a friend, at whose request I visited the place with a view to obtaining a photograph of the eyrie. The nest contained two young birds, and was accessible to a climber of ordinary ability. From a photographer's point of view, however, the position presented difficulties, and we were constrained to borrow ladders from the nearest farm before a suitable foothold for taking the picture could be obtained. For the time being, no disastrous consequences attended the proceeding. The young birds took flight in due course, and we fondly hoped that no harm had been done. In that belief, however, we were mistaken. The parent buzzards returned to the wood next season, and, much to the owner's delight, built a new nest, in which two young birds were hatched and appeared to be thriving. As ill luck would have it, however, about this time two "bright youths" came to stay at the farm from which we had borrowed the ladders, and, hearing the story, paid a surreptitious visit to the wood as a matter of course. Being professed naturalists, they should have been content to leave the birds undisturbed after satisfying their curiosity, but for that very reason the temptation to experiment proved too strong for them, and when they left the neighbourhood a day or two later, the young buzzards, secure in a basket, accompanied them. At the end of the season, having demonstrated to



science that young buzzards could live in captivity—a fact which nobody wanted to know or had dreamed of questioning—these enthusiastic naturalists were good enough to restore the birds to their native haunts, having thoroughly unfitted them for the wild life, with the probable consequence that they were speedily shot or trapped. The parent birds, needless to say, forsook the eyrie, where they would doubtless have reared many broods in safety had they been unmolested, but in all probability the two amateur ornithologists still cherish the belief that they rendered a signal service to the cause of bird-study generally. In reality, they did irreparable harm, and were liable to prosecution for contravention of the Wild Birds Protection Acts. The case is only one of many, and public-spirited people should miss no opportunity of discouraging similar practices.

Every reasonable person must admit that a measure of sacrifice is justifiable in the pursuance of useful and really interesting research. At the same time there is a wide difference between intelligent research and the dabbings of the dilettante, and the distinction cannot be too strongly emphasized. One might venture to suggest that too much importance is attached nowadays to trifling “discoveries”, which are not worth the cost of a single bird’s life. Under existing conditions, the sacrifice of a “rarity” purely for identification purposes cannot be justified. The stock argument that the fact of its “occurrence” in some particular locality can be established by no other means provides at best a poor excuse. After all, is the knowledge that a certain species has

once accidentally alighted in any given county so invaluable to posterity? The claims of posterity would be better served by allowing the bird to live, its destruction being the most effectual means of preventing its recurrence. We are assured that the rarity would not remain in the neighbourhood even if unmolested. Probably not; but it would stand a fair chance of winning back to its own place, which is all that one need desire. If only ornithologists would concentrate on the preservation of our fast-disappearing avifauna rather than upon freak occurrences and the establishing of records, great service might be rendered to the cause. So few of our keenest observers appear to realize that without more adequate protection there will soon be nothing to observe.

Even a nominal acknowledgment of the existing Wild Birds Protection Acts would render their open disregard a matter of considerable difficulty, and every Bird Society should institute a rigid rule requiring each member to report any offences against these Acts. It should be the business of the Society to give publicity to such offences and to see that proper action is taken. The individual would thus to some extent be relieved from personal responsibility in the matter, which is eminently desirable. The great difficulty in enforcing such a rule, or in obtaining the necessary evidence, lies in the perfectly natural reluctance upon the part of private people to take any steps in the matter. As often as not, the person against whom information should be laid happens to be a neighbour, or even a personal friend whose views upon this particular point do

not coincide with one's own. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that the representative of avian interests too frequently prefers to "look the other way", and the cause suffers in consequence.

In the matter of real rarities, so keenly sought by collectors, great service might be rendered to the interests of preservation were a closer watch imposed upon the operations of taxidermists. No man can "set up" or take charge of a protected bird that has been unlawfully shot without becoming an accessory, and conviction should involve the forfeiture of both the specimen and any fees due to the taxidermist.

Personally, I would urge Bird Societies to place protection before all things, and the avowed intention of certain papers to publish flagrant instances of law violation in this connection seems better calculated to achieve the desired end than all the "appeals" ever circulated. The fine of a few shillings means little to the ordinary man, but he dislikes the social pillory in which he is placed when proved guilty of vandalism. At a recent meeting of one of these societies, it was proposed that members should try the force of "persuasion" to induce game-preservers to respect the law in the case of the buzzard. One was reminded of a certain ecclesiastical gathering, in the course of which an eminent dignitary suggested that a "quiet day" now and again might serve to stimulate the spiritual lethargy of the public. The idea was discountenanced, however, by a rural incumbent who pointed out that his parish already enjoyed three hundred and sixty five quiet days each year, and rather urged the need

for a "moderate earthquake". Upon the same principle, the quiescent attitude has prevailed too long in the matter of bird protection. From long impunity, disregard of the law is looked upon as a right, and a rude awakening is eminently necessary to dispel the illusion.

The increasing interest taken in Nature study during recent years has led to the belief that many rare birds are more widely distributed in the British Isles than was once the case. In certain instances this may be true, but more often than not it is merely a matter of wider publicity being given to their whereabouts. Not long ago I read an announcement in a sporting periodical to the effect that the landrail might now be regarded as virtually extinct. For my own part I had seen but one specimen within a long period of years, but a request in a West-Country paper for news of the species soon brought more answers from remote Cornish farms and villages than I could conveniently cope with. Lately, again, there have been "discoveries" of Devonshire nightingales in unfrequented valleys where the bird has possibly been singing for centuries in blissful ignorance of its unconventional behaviour. On the other hand, the wide-ranging habits of the larger species frequently give rise to exaggerated ideas as to their numbers. A pair of ravens or buzzards, for example, can easily patrol a hundred square miles of country, and half a dozen observers within that area may record their movements as those of distinct pairs, and each man in all good faith may claim to have discovered the whereabouts of their breeding-place, particularly along the coast-

line or in mountainous country where the actual eyrie might be difficult to locate. I have known cases in which two or three nests have been recorded when only one existed.

Exaggerated ideas as to the numerical status of such a bird as the buzzard may well have disastrous consequences, since too many people, if persuaded of its abundance, are liable to take the law into their own hands. There are a great many men who have always been ready to destroy the birds upon the slightest pretext. In the hunting-field I have heard a farmer boasting openly of a "right and left" achieved at the expense of the big hawks, and once when calling at a neighbouring house, I was surprised to see a buzzard spread out upon a big water-butt near the door in the manner best calculated to display its plumage. The farmer's son, a fifteen-year-old boy, who had shot the bird, had never even heard of the Wild Birds Protection Acts, and was unpleasantly surprised to learn that he had placed himself within the power of the law. Upon yet another occasion, I met a countryman returning from pigeon-shooting, who, in response to my inquiry, "What sport?" replied with an aggrieved air, "None." One shot only had fallen to his share, he complained, and that one—in which circumstance lay his grievance—had not even been fired at a pigeon. The despised trophy had only been a buzzard, which he had left where it fell, not considering it worth picking up, merely regretting the expenditure of the cartridge. One could only wish that the latter consideration had occurred to him sooner. That a rustic should casually begrudge twopence expended

upon the commission of an unlawful act lent a spice of irony to the situation that I scarcely appreciated at the moment.

One might collect fifty similar instances of law-breaking, each of which speaks sufficiently for itself. The activities of keepers and agriculturists, though frequently uncalled-for and much to be deplored, must none the less be regarded in a somewhat different light. It seems only reasonable that every man should have the right to protect his own property, or that entrusted to his charge, and in the unlikely event of a buzzard developing into a confirmed game or poultry thief, nobody should complain were that particular bird destroyed. On the other hand, the alleged harmfulness of a species in no way justifies the destruction of individuals at the hands of people who have suffered nothing from its depredations. How often one hears a man declare that he shoots all rapacious birds upon principle, not for the mere pleasure of killing something, but he considers it his duty to do so, the bird being "so harmful" to the property of other people. An excellent principle, but is he always so solicitous for the property of others? Does he also consider it his duty to stop and pull up a particularly sturdy-looking dock or wayside thistle? He should, if his heart is so large, his conscience so tender, for that dock or thistle, if allowed to seed, will do more harm upon the neighbouring fields than all the buzzards in the county. Here, however, I fancy him remarking that it is the farmer's business to weed his own fields. Quite true; but it is equally his business to take care of his poultry, even as it is the keeper's

duty to guard his own pheasant chicks, and either may be depended upon to do all that is necessary—and more—if I do not misjudge my fellow-countrymen.

Among game-preservers generally, a considerable difference of opinion exists concerning the buzzard, and one might go so far as to assert that from his attitude in this respect a tolerably accurate estimate may be formed as to the type of sportsman with whom one has to deal. Allowing for the inevitable degree of prejudice upon either side, the contradictory statements upon which such difference is based point to the usual solution of such questions. Neither faction is wholly right or wrong. Instances of depredations can doubtless be established against the buzzard, as against almost any large bird one cares to mention—even the curlew is now accused of nest-robbing. It is probable, too, that other birds are shy of the big hawk. Woodpigeons are particularly averse to them as neighbours, and this is made a ground of complaint; for while pigeons stand branded upon paper as undesirable to the countryside, there are few sportsmen and fewer keepers who do not like to have the birds in their woods.

One must always be prepared to admit possible drawbacks attached to the presence of rapacious birds or beasts. In all these cases, one can but repeat the fact that no wild creature is entirely "harmless", and to argue from such a standpoint is to court discomfiture. The inevitable "authenticated instance" which the rival disputant has at his fingers' ends lands one upon bedrock, and the

“exception” argument, however true, rarely proves convincing. Points that cannot be refuted are better frankly conceded, and in all matters of the kind a stronger case can usually be established upon purely æsthetic grounds, as I have already remarked in the case of the badger. The principle that calls for the preservation of wild creatures, even at slight cost to the agriculturist or game-preserve, is identical with that which prompts the “save the countryside movement”, even though so-called progress in shape of hideous commercial erections upon favourite beauty spots may be debarred in consequence. Or the sentiment might be compared with that which spares some exquisite shrub or tree, despite the shade which it casts once a day across somebody’s potato patch.

Here, at any rate, one is upon sure ground, for diametrically opposite views can scarcely be expressed without the opponent proclaiming himself a vandal. The economic side of the question must always be faced sooner or later, however, and upon this point long and careful observation has convinced me that the hostility entertained in certain quarters towards the buzzard lacks substantial justification. For a rapacious creature, the bird is remarkably inoffensive, and, quite apart from his supreme value as an ornament, is deserving of every consideration. Public sentiment, based upon every conceivable authority, has long declared itself in favour of the “lovely and innocent kestrel”; but, while neither intending nor desiring to exculpate one species by incriminating another, if faced with the choice of either kestrels or buzzards as near neigh-



bours to game-chicks, my selection certainly would not fall upon the popular little red falcon, comparatively harmless as he is.

The ardent seekers after "information" might perform a valuable service by studying closely the actual habits of the buzzard, about which very little is really known. Old writers, content to copy from one another, had virtually nothing to say—one and all assuring their readers that the bird was "sluggish", given to spending its time in a lethargic state upon some tree; while modern descriptions, written for the most part "around" photographs, mainly relate to the procuring of the pictures. The one infallible method of discovering what a bird has really been eating—a post-mortem upon its interior—does not commend itself for cogent reasons. It necessitates the destruction of too many specimens, since a considerable number must needs be examined to determine the menu of the majority. The necessary data can only be obtained, therefore, by means of patient observation, and this is rendered difficult by the fact that the buzzard is seldom seen feeding or even in search of food. Tragic testimony of the manner in which the sparrow-hawk obtains its livelihood confronts the most casual observer every day. The kestrel quarters the stubbles and marshes in clear view, as though to advertise his methods. The peregrine strikes down his game under the eyes of the fowler. The big buzzard on the contrary attends to his considerable needs with astonishing secrecy, and rarely does one obtain an opportunity of watching him at work.

So far as one can judge, a buzzard rarely seeks

food in the neighbourhood of its eyrie. Quitting the nesting-grove soon after sunrise, he mounts to a vast height, then, setting his ample wings to the breeze, he sails across miles of country to some lonely marsh away in the heart of the moorland, over which he cruises for a while in wide circles ; then, assured at last that he has the landscape to himself, he slants to earth and begins his hunt for the small mammals and reptiles which appear to form his staple diet. One often surprises him upon the ground where he has been grubbing about among the boulders and heather roots, and where he must have been for a considerable while, as his descent could not have escaped notice across the open moors. His objective upon these occasions is obvious from the dead moles and young rabbits that adorn his nest, and I have noticed that his periods of pedestrianism frequently coincide with those in which moles are " heaving ". On the moorlands, too, he avails himself of a somewhat unusual source of supply. Not long ago a friend of mine surprised a buzzard when following the course of a lonely Dartmoor stream, the rhythm of which so drowned the sound of his footsteps that he was within a few yards of the big hawk before it espied him and rose hastily—so hastily, indeed, that it dropped the object with which it had been occupied. This upon inspection proved to be a large viper, freshly killed, and the instance is by no means unique.

During the summer months there can be no doubt that young rabbits figure largely in the buzzard's menu. In search of these he descends to the furze-brakes, where he may be seen at times perched upon

a stub or low-growing branch, maintaining a cat-like watch, after the manner of an eagle when on the look-out for mountain hares. I once met a buzzard full tilt in a narrow opening between two gorse-bushes. There was so little room to spare that his wings almost brushed me in passing, and the big fellow's exit was one of the quickest things I ever witnessed. A swerve, a slant, a mighty flap or two to get up steam, a whistling rush of strong pinions, and within a few seconds he was sailing over some big trees a hundred yards away.

For my own part I am convinced that birds are capable of far greater speed at times than the mathematicians would have us believe. The rapidity which they have been known to achieve when pursued by aircraft is not necessarily their best. On the contrary, the whirr of the pursuing engine is more than likely to have the same paralysing influence upon them as the sound of a reaping machine upon hares and rabbits in a corn-field. The speed of a partridge, for example, is estimated at thirty miles an hour, but the motor that crosses an open heath at the same rate as a covey skimming before the guns would, I imagine, create something in the way of a mild sensation.

Having seen the activity displayed by that particular buzzard, I can readily believe him capable of arresting the flight of a woodpigeon or anything else. I do not think, however, that he concerns himself with birds as a general rule. Everything proclaims him a hunter of fur rather than feather, and though content to accept the gifts that the gods provide in the shape of some foolhardy pigeon or

partridge that crosses his line of flight, he is neither temperamentally nor physically adapted for the regular pursuit of winged game. Capable as he seems to be of stupendous and almost unlimited exertion, he lacks the fiery energy of the sparrow-hawk, the fierce spirit of the falcon ; while his ample and wonderfully buoyant wings, so admirably adapted for effortless soaring and interminable evolutions above the clouds themselves, would be useless for the lightning-like doublings and hide-and-seek work among the low-growing branches and under-brush essential to successful warfare upon the feathered races.

That the buzzard like the raven is not averse to a cheap meal off a dead sheep or lamb now and again cannot be questioned. I do not believe that a carnivorous animal exists that would not do likewise. The big hawks do not assemble, however, like crows or ravens to a feast, nor are they powerful enough to carry away bodily large birds or animals. A buzzard afloat on the blue air, with handsome pinions spread to their full extent, gives an impression of size which he is far from possessing. Indeed, in general bulk he yields place by a considerable margin to the raven, though few people familiar with the appearance of both birds upon the wing would believe it. The size of birds is eminently deceptive. A female sparrow-hawk is often larger than a male peregrine, and a buzzard, for all his eagle-like appearance, possesses very little physical advantages over a carrion crow, which is in truth by far the more formidable bird of the two. The few inches that he lacks in length of wing and pinion

are more than atoned for by his truculent and pugnacious disposition, which, together with the serviceable character of his bayonet-like beak, renders him an antagonist with whom the buzzard not unnaturally declines to join issue.

Between these two birds a curious antipathy exists—purely defensive, so far as the buzzard is concerned—and differences of opinion ensue whenever they happen to meet. Upon numerous occasions I have watched these interesting contests—if so they can be termed, since they amount to little more than competitions in wing-power, in which the buzzards invariably hold their own. They are most frequent during the nesting-season, and usually take the form of “foursomes” in consequence. The crows, like the skilful strategists that they are, always combine in attacking *one* buzzard at a time, and I have seen the second hawk alight on a tree and watch the elusive activities of its mate with every appearance of interest until the latter, wearying of the affair, retired to the tree likewise, whereupon they would exchange places, the onlooker taking his or her turn to play the principal part. One seldom sees either side lose a feather, the affray invariably ending in the final ascent of the buzzards into terrifying altitudes, and the disgruntled return of the blackamoors to their own lower levels.

Works of reference frequently credit the buzzard with the trick of appropriating the abandoned nursery of a crow, while the author of a recent popular Nature book refers to the birds as repairing their nests at spring's approach. As a general rule the buzzard does neither. The bird is an industrious

and elaborate builder, seldom making second use of a nest, although in one instance I remember a pair that returned to an abandoned nursery after an absence of three years.<sup>1</sup> Again, he almost invariably selects a site entirely different from that chosen by a crow. Crows, like rooks, prefer to build among the topmost branches, choosing the highest crotch consistent with safety. The buzzard on the contrary rarely places its bulkier structure anywhere near the top of a tree. He likes more solid foundations, selecting some mighty fork that is collapsible only with the tree itself, and for this reason a beech or Scotch fir is usually preferred. The nest itself is of ample dimensions, as large at times as an inverted umbrella, presenting in itself no mean barrier to the would-be inspector of its contents. Indeed, so frustrating is its girth at times when one's hold happens to be precarious, that not infrequently one returns to earth after a hard climb none the wiser for the adventure. The buzzard, it should be mentioned, in common with the sparrow-hawk, has the curious habit of occasionally building *two* nests, but whether in such cases one is abandoned on account of unsuitability or built upon the same principle as a "dummy" nest is an open question.

Birds of the forest as they are, buzzards do not nest for choice in the largest woods. They are more partial to small outstanding clumps, particularly Scotch fir spinneys surrounded by open country. At the approach of a human enemy, both birds mount into the air and circle overhead, uttering their

<sup>1</sup>This particular nest has now been used for three years in succession.

strident menacing scream, by which means they frequently betray the secret that they desire above all things to preserve. So conspicuous is the great nest in any case, that by little short of a miracle can it fail to attract attention. Sometimes, of course, it is inaccessible. More frequently, it owes its escape—if so fortunate—to happy accident, of which I saw an example a year or two ago. When out with a shooting-party early in September, I noticed a family of buzzards that had evidently been reared in an old fir spinney where, under ordinary circumstances, they would have stood little chance of hatching. Assuming the nest to have been built in some sky-scraping crotch that had baffled—for once—the youth of the neighbourhood, I thought little more of it. Later in the season, however, when trying through the spinney in quest of the elusive woodcock, I scanned the big trees in vain for the unmistakable structure, and was not a little surprised to find it at last, not in one of the firs at all, but in a stunted oak growing amongst some holly-scrub apart from the main timber, and so low that a child could have clambered to it without difficulty. It could not have been more than ten feet above ground and was screened from observation by surrounding evergreens. One would never have dreamed of looking for such a nest in such a place, to which fact, no doubt, it owed its immunity.

Like most of the hawk tribe, these birds pair for life. The buzzard is more of a "family" bird, however, than the majority of its congeners, old and young remaining together like ravens for the greater part of the year, only separating in early spring

when the young birds obey the call of the season. They are bold when their nest is menaced, and though rarely, if ever, actually venturing to attack a human being, the swish of great wings sounds very near the climber's head at times as he mounts towards the nest, and the loud angry scream can be decidedly unnerving upon such occasions. The young are never forsaken while either parent survives, and, if captured, have been followed an astonishing distance and reclaimed.

How the buzzard ever obtained that ancient reputation for lethargy must puzzle anyone who has watched the bird at his seemingly tireless aerial circlings. Dignified in all his movements, there is, admittedly, no suggestion of haste or effort about him as he cruises upon still wings above earth and clouds alike; but the lack of obvious effort is no indication of indolence. Correctly termed the "noblest of aeronauts", the buzzard is rather an emblem of perpetual motion than inertia, and far from spending the greater part of the day, like a sleepy old owl, upon a perch, the air is his natural element, and being, like an eagle, a creature of the upper heights, he loves best to mount to altitudes so vast that the human eye can scarcely follow his evolutions.

In the air a poem of grace; on earth beneficial rather than harmful to mankind; in his domestic life a model of constancy and parental affection; beautiful and unobtrusive; useless when dead; living, a source of pure pleasure to all who can appreciate the finest figures in Nature's pageant, the buzzard deserves a wider recognition, a firmer status



in our English woodlands. Captain Knight is endeavouring, very creditably, to reinstate the osprey. But why was its banishment ever permitted? We exterminate our noblest birds, then expend endless time and money upon efforts to reintroduce them. Let us at least endeavour to preserve the few fine species that we still possess.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE MINOR ORCHESTRA

At no season of the year can the actual Moor be fitly described as a country remarkable for wild-bird song. The small feathered life of the uplands is too strictly limited, and with one or two notable exceptions the birds of the hills are not the best songsters. It might almost seem that the keen mountain air affects the throats of the little vocalists, the bold and somewhat harsh notes of the ring-ouzel comparing but poorly with the rich strains of the civilized blackbird. At best, the full orchestra of the moorland is but a faint echo of the volume of song that fills the woods on a bright May morning. On the hills again, the auditorium is so vast that multitudinous indeed must be the bird voices capable of filling it. They are swallowed up, curiously enough, in the very *silence* of the landscape, even as scattered raindrops are absorbed by a dry dusty countryside, and though always audible, as often as not scarcely reach the conscious ear except by a deliberate effort of the senses.

Most pronounced of moorland vocalists stands forth the skylark, still heard along every ridge on sunny days, although its numbers have decreased considerably within recent years on account of the

extensive heather fires, by means of which incredible numbers are destroyed annually. I have always retained a vivid impression of one skylark's nest which I found by chance one cold early May morning on a patch of sparse turf full upon the windy crest of High Willhayes. Screened only by a scanty wisp of heather, there it nestled amongst the wind-dappled herbage, the highest home in all southern England, and it seemed oddly appropriate that the lark of all birds should have selected such a nursery.

The woodlark is somewhat unevenly distributed over Mid-Devon, but is more plentiful in southern districts, where its arresting little song is frequently mistaken for that of the nightingale. Its absence from the northern hills deprives the moorland chorus of a charming melody-maker, the comparative scarcity of bird song rendering the circumstance all the more regrettable. In certain localities, however, the silence of the woodlark is compensated for to some extent by the beautiful and persistent song of the sedge-warbler, which occurs even upon the highest ranges, and I have found its nest upon a grassy bank near Dinger Tor, just on the fringe of a little swampy depression.

Most common of all the Moor birds, although not particularly outstanding, is the meadow-pit, more generally known in the locality as the "twit-lark". Inconspicuous as a songster, the meadow-pit is best known to the casual walker upon the hills as the somewhat nondescript little bird that twitters up at his approach, arousing no further interest than a casual passing glance. Upon the high moorlands, this species constitutes the main

chorus of which his more distinguished relatives are the principals, and upon a summer day, when bees are droning and gorse-pods popping like fairy musketry in the warm sunlight, it is his optimistic little piping refrain which arises on every side. The meadow-pipit is most numerous upon the lower ground, particularly around the mires or upon swampy slopes where it feeds, and where it usually nests upon little heathery banks and mounds surrounded by sphagnum moss and even standing water. Common as it is, the neat little nest with its chocolate-coloured clutch cannot fail to be attractive, and in favourite localities, such as warm hollows or southern slopes, one may come upon almost any number in the course of a morning's walk. In more exposed places, on the other hand, one may tramp the coarse herbage for many miles without seeing a single nest. For that matter, it is seldom of much use actually to seek nests of any sort upon the Moor. The spaces are so extensive, with little to commend one spot above another, that it is usually a matter of pure accident whether one flushes a brooding bird, or passes by perhaps within only a few feet of her.

Along almost any rocky coombe the harsh metallic challenge of the stonechat announces its presence. This species, though officially resident upon the moors, is exceedingly local in the selection of its winter quarters, remaining in residence throughout the year upon the southern side of the Moor, but forsaking the northern districts as a rule in favour of less exposed ground. Unlike the majority of birds, its return to its summer haunts is decidedly erratic as to date, and after the long cold spring of

1930, the species was so late in making its appearance in the upper valleys of the Dart, the Teign and the Taw that local observers had almost ceased to expect its arrival, coming to the conclusion that the hard winter had practically exterminated it for the time being, as happened in the case of the woodlark a year or two previously. As late in the season as May 20, the birds suddenly reappeared in considerable numbers, filling every valley with their distinctive notes as though to atone for their long absence.

Few birds are more conspicuous than the stonechat; none more wary in guarding the secret of its nesting-place. The nest, indeed, can only be discovered as a rule by dint of long and patient watching with a field-glass. It is usually well concealed deep among the roots of the gorse or heather, nor does the brooding bird betray its whereabouts by flying off in the customary manner, excepting upon very rare occasions. It is as cunning in this respect as a lapwing or a curlew, and even more difficult to detect. Upon one occasion I was watching a couple of dogs nosing about in a little patch of heather, evidently hot upon some scent, when, glancing down by chance, I espied a female stonechat with wings spread like a partridge trickling through some coarse grass almost at my feet. That the dogs had disturbed her at her task of incubation was obvious, but the most exhaustive search failed to reveal the nest. The incident occurred in the North Teign Valley, and an hour later, by curious chance, half a mile farther upstream another stonechat rose straight from her nest in a little heather-bush a few feet

ahead of me, stonechats and their many baffling ways being far from my thoughts at that precise moment. It was peculiarly characteristic of Dartmoor bird study, and, incidentally, the only occasion upon which I have found the nest of this elusive species without considerable difficulty. In this case, the little blue clutch was probably "hard set", and the instinct to sit close was even stronger for once than that of skilfully executed retreat.

More local in its distribution, but numerous in favourite localities, is the whinchat, whose soft warbling little song is scarcely noticeable when the lark and the meadow-pipit are in full chorus. This bird is easily distinguishable from the stonechat by the white stripe above the eye, and though bold enough, it strikes the observer as less aggressive in its manner of attracting notice than its better-known cousin. It possesses all the stonechat's elusiveness, while young birds that have not acquired full wing-power frequently "go to ground" when scared, in rabbit-holes or under the rocks with all the alacrity of mice. More than once when a dog has barked at a hole in a bank or under a boulder, I have discovered a young whinchat squatting in some crevice at arm's length from the entrance, and, when released, after flying for a short distance, it invariably seeks a similar and usually a more secure hiding-place.

Less local upon the whole, but equally conservative in its predilection for certain districts, the wheatear is common upon the western highlands, although, curiously enough, it appears to possess no definite identity among the majority of country-people. Rarely does one hear it mentioned by name, and

usually if one speaks of the bird to an intelligent moorman, it soon becomes apparent from his remarks that he is confusing it with the stonechat. This is the more remarkable since the wheatear at one time, like the skylark, was caught in considerable numbers for the table, and one might reasonably suppose that older people at any rate would have known the bird at least as a marketable commodity.

A wheatear's nest is no easier to find than that of a stonechat, but for a somewhat different reason, it being one of the few birds that build practically underground, or, more literally, under the base of some big rock. It is also fond of old stone walls, particularly the ancient substantial type, concealing its secret somewhere in the maze of dark crevices among the huge boulders which the squatters of former days were not averse to handling. Upon the lonely little Brimbrook, a season or two ago, I came across a characteristic wheatear home among the ruins of some old workings, and, attracted to the spot by the sight of the bird entering with food, succeeded in obtaining a photograph of the nest. This was not easily done, great care being necessary to avoid damaging the nursery by misplacing the stones. It was achieved without catastrophe of any sort, however, and the following year, when again passing the spot, it was gratifying to find it once more occupied. The original nest, having been repaired, contained six eggs, and one could but marvel at the unerring instinct which had guided so small a bird upon its long journey from the sunny south back to that one desolate little spot among the hills which a human being in such a case would scarcely have

found a second time without the course of the stream to serve as a guide.

Naturally, Dartmoor is not a country of rare occurrences among the smaller birds. The snow-bunting is a more or less regular winter visitor, his arrival in late autumn being regarded by the moormen as a sign that the woodcock may shortly be expected. In the spring of 1929 a hoopoe appeared in the garden of a private house at Belstone. The occurrence was regarded as unique—for the northern Moor—and generally attributed to chance. It remained for a week, then passed on, and was more or less forgotten, until the following year at the corresponding approximate date, it arrived once more, again displaying itself with the utmost fearlessness about the lawns and shrubberies. Upon neither occasion did it stir beyond the precincts of the garden, nor was its arrival or departure witnessed. It came and went by night, bound for some definite destination—probably a warmer district—the interesting part of the proceeding lying in the bird's selection of that particular spot upon both occasions. How many similar occurrences, one wonders, pass unperceived, and how often are incidents attributed to chance, when in truth the explanation is far more remarkable.

I have sometimes wondered whether the irresponsible cuckoo has ever found its unbidden way into a wheatear's nest. Such an instance has never come to my knowledge, although there is no practical difficulty in the way of its occurrence. In this part of the country the cuckoo is usually heard upon the moorlands a day or two before it reaches the lower levels, and its arrival may be expected any day from



the 19th to the 24th of April. When talking to an old Devonian not long ago, I was amazed to find that the ancient superstition concerning this bird and its supposed transformation into a sparrow-hawk during the winter months is by no means dead even now among the villagers. Many quaint ideas with reference to the bird still exist, the case of the schoolboy who defined the species as "a bird what laid other birds' eggs in its own nest" being scarcely more extravagant than others in circulation. Even so, with the absurdity of the old notions before us by way of "horrible example", one is sometimes inclined to wonder whether one or two of the newer ideas are not likewise verging upon the fantastic, and whether they may not seem almost equally ridiculous when handed down to posterity.

We are living in an age of "discovery", a propensity that has been extended in no limited degree to every branch of Natural History study. Problems which completely baffled the old ornithologists are settled at one glance through up-to-date binoculars, whilst species long regarded as extinct, or practically so, reappear in every corner of the island with astonishing frequency. In the latter case there can be little doubt that the attitude of former observers was at times unduly pessimistic. They lacked the modern naturalist's wider facilities and means, not only of procuring more accurate information, but of penetrating into the less-accessible districts and settling doubtful questions. At the same time, if the old naturalists were pessimistic, there appears to be a danger that observers of the present day, fired by youthful enthusiasm, are galloping to the other

extreme. Vexed problems are disposed of too easily ; rarities present themselves too frequently to be convincing ; while records of every description have become somewhat too commonplace. Indeed, so many of our newly discovered swans prove geese when subjected to the cold light of investigation, that the attitude of the sceptic is beginning to bear a disconcerting resemblance to sanity.

We no longer imagine that the cuckoo changes its identity or hibernates in rabbit-holes, but we are beginning to accredit it with habits, the possession of which might easily magnify it into an almost equally remarkable bird. Its manner, for example, of depositing its egg in places clearly inaccessible to the bird itself has now been vouched for by various authoritative witnesses. It is said to choose a convenient spot for the process of laying, then, lifting the egg in its beak, conveys and deposits it gently in the selected nest. Former naturalists of equal integrity claim to have seen the cuckoo in the act of flying with an egg in its *claw*, whilst another vividly describes the desperate struggles of a bird to force an entry into a swallow's nest for the obvious purpose of laying. Being thwarted in this desire by the narrowness of the aperture, the egg was lost in consequence, and, falling to earth, was found by the observer, broken but easily recognizable.

The earlier observers, we are now assured, were "mistaken", and there can be little doubt that numerous errors occurred, but is it also certain that modern naturalists are altogether infallible ? We were lately informed by an eminent scholar that science might be defined as the continual discovery

of its own mistakes, in which case, one is perhaps justified in not always accepting new theories unreservedly, since they in their turn may easily be rejected with the advance of knowledge.

It has been clearly established by the observations of Mr. Edgar Chance that the cuckoo, after selecting a nest in which to lay, ejects one of the lawful clutch and proceeds to lay her own in the customary manner, and the alleged discovery of cuckoos' eggs in nests to which the bird could not have had access in the customary way seems scarcely sufficient to justify the now-popular supposition that the bird deliberately places it there with beak or claw. That many good ornithologists adopt this view I am well aware. Nevertheless, one cannot but remark that such a proceeding upon the part of the cuckoo seems utterly incompatible, not only with bird nature as a whole but with the cuckoo's obviously irresponsible character. Impelled by instinct to deposit her egg in a nest corresponding with that in which she was reared, it seems only rational to suppose that the bird would do so in the usual way, which accomplished, all further interest in the egg would cease. If unable to find a suitable depository, it may reasonably be assumed that she would adopt the obvious alternative of laying the egg upon any available spot. That it should evince any after-consideration for the fate of that egg is surely improbable. The domestic hen makes use of the nest provided, but she displays no interest in the fate of eggs inadvertently dropped in the run, and the cuckoo, it must be remembered, lacks even the incubating instinct of the domestic fowl. Again—

and this is of greater significance—the most intelligent of wild birds makes no attempt to recover one of its own eggs, or even a young nestling, when accidentally ejected. On the contrary, once outside the nest, a young bird appears to lose its identity, and is allowed to perish of cold or starvation within a few inches of the nest in which its more fortunate fellows are being warmed and fed. The reason, no doubt, lies in the fact that the conventional place for young birds is inside and not out of the nest until they are old enough to quit it of their own accord. The bird mind suggests no course of action for dealing with the unconventional or the unprecedented, and so the ousted nestling is abandoned to its fate. Later on, when the proper time comes for young ones to venture forth, nothing can exceed the parent's solicitude. Then, however, they are only acting according to immemorial custom, and the old birds have no doubt as to their duty. If, therefore, the intelligent robin, for example, is incapable of obeying other than primitive instincts when dealing with its own offspring which it is accustomed to feed and tend, is it even tolerably reasonable to assume that the feckless cuckoo should exhibit almost human forethought and consideration for the future welfare of an egg about which it can care nothing?

To account for the presence of eggs in nests to which the cuckoo could not have had access in the ordinary way, one can only say that were such cases explicable the mystery would cease to exist. It should be borne in mind, however, that in many of the given instances, the generally accepted solution,

or the idea that the bird has placed the egg in its curious lodging-place with beak or claw, must appear equally impossible upon careful consideration. Some of these cases indeed are so extraordinary, however regarded, that one is inclined to wonder whether anyone is really upon the right track in the various explanations that have been suggested. Upon one point, however, there is need for care. One takes it for granted that such cases are fully authenticated, but it is well to discover if possible how many people have had access to the nests in question. One might add that it is difficult to see how a cuckoo could *drop* her egg into a deep nest without injuring one or more of the clutch. This would matter nothing to the cuckoo, but what about the other bird? A broken egg in a nest usually means a nest forsaken. It is one thing, moreover, to eject an egg with beak or claw, to make room for the alien. To lift and place an egg that had been laid outside would involve the exercise of a diametrically opposite instinct.

Another debatable point is the prodigious number of eggs for which the modern cuckoo is held responsible. She is accused of laying twenty or more, in view of which it is somewhat remarkable that a bird subject to no persecution should decline rather than increase in numbers. It is admittedly possible that the astonishing disparity in size between a cuckoo's egg and that of a similarly proportioned bird may induce for quantity rather than quality. At the same time, the supposition scarcely bears inspection. Were such the case, its laying period would extend well into June, with the result that the cuckoo, who upon Dartmoor almost invariably favours a meadow-

pipit when choosing a foster-mother, would experience considerable difficulty in disposing of her later changelings, the majority of clutches being already incubated. Common sense, indeed, seems to indicate that the cuckoo is, if anything, *less* prolific than the majority of birds, and one might venture to suggest that in the case of established "records" in this connection the misdemeanours of several cuckoos have been ascribed to one. Many naturalists who think otherwise appear to stake their faith upon the remarkable similarity between eggs found within limited areas. These eggs, not unreasonably, are attributed to one bird, but the assumption is not without its weak points. It is held as a general, though not invariable rule, that the egg of the cuckoo bears some resemblance to those of the bird in whose nest it is laid; also, that the mature bird, when its own time comes to lay, automatically chooses a nest identical with that in which it was reared. One might *almost* argue, therefore, that there are distinct varieties of cuckoos, the divisions consisting of those birds which are reared almost invariably by some particular species, and between the eggs of these birds a strong similarity would almost certainly exist.

In any district it may be taken as practically assured that one or other of the cuckoo's favourite foster-mothers would predominate. As I have remarked, upon the moorlands the meadow-pipit predominates. In more thickly populated districts perhaps the hedge-sparrow would claim numerical superiority; in marshy country, reed birds might be most in vogue. It stands to reason, therefore,

that in each locality the majority of cuckoos' eggs would be laid in the nests of the most numerous species, and as the natural result of "long selection" a strong general similarity between the eggs laid within that area may be considered inevitable. One might also venture to remark that a striking resemblance between a large number of eggs does not necessarily prove a common parentage, though the possibility naturally suggests itself. Indeed, in the case of a large clutch, identical markings are rather the exception than the rule. Eggs beautifully marked and others almost devoid of colour frequently lie side by side, and at times dissimilarities in shape are even more striking. One might add that the eggs in a market-woman's basket are curiously alike, but one hen is rarely held responsible for the entire collection.

Of all our feathered visitors, the cuckoo in its recognized rôle of summer harbinger is perhaps the most popular. Other birds, however, look askance at this gay Harold Skimpole from overseas, but whether this is due to his hawklike appearance or to an instinctive dislike of the abnormal is an open question. His parasitic habits, if understood, might conceivably earn him their dislike, for, assuming even a measure of truth in the big-clutch theory, every female cuckoo must cost the locality that she favours a very considerable number of bird lives. This, however, is a distinctly controversial subject. Bewick seemed to be of the opinion that the "solitary egg" consigned to the care of some unsuspecting little feathered matron represented the cuckoo's sole effort. For my own part, I would suggest a "happy

medium" as the most probable solution of the riddle.

The "stickle" ferny coombes with their outcrops of grey rock and viper-haunted shingle still constitute the home of the nightjar, who is one of the latest arrivals upon the summer moorlands. In Devonshire he is known among the country-people as the "night crow", though a creature more singularly uncrow-like could scarcely be imagined. Again, in many moorland districts the famous "churring" note, which to the majority of people is the sole evidence of the bird's presence, is even now commonly attributed to the landrail, the true author of the sound being entirely unknown. Indeed, to the average countryman the nightjar is but a voice, and the rustic who listens to the weird churring refrain at dusk seldom connects it with the curious bird that he occasionally flushes from some quiet corner of the heath and mistakes for a cuckoo or a "hawk"—one of the most comprehensive words in native ornithology.

His note is never heard until the crispness is gone from the air, and the bird is not in full voice until June at earliest. The nightjar is pre-eminently a warmth-loving creature, from which circumstance it derives its reputation as a fine-weather prophet, though as a matter of fact its activities during fair periods are merely the result of actual conditions, and my own observations do not bear out the popular belief that the weird twilight solo means sunshine on the morrow.

Of all night birds it is the most fearless, and an evening walk along any valley frequented by night-



jars can scarcely fail to be enlivened by their curious antics. Upon numberless occasions when rabbit-stalking between the lights I have been astonished at their boldness as they flitted about me, displaying no fear of the gun, sometimes even alighting on stumps or banks within a few feet of me and uttering their strange notes entirely regardless of my presence.

The extreme awkwardness for which the bird is renowned when upon the ground is doubtless the reason why it makes no nest, the eggs being laid upon the bare heath, though a slight hollow, such as the hoof-print of a horse or cow, is sometimes used. When once upon the wing, however, there is no longer any sign of awkwardness. On the contrary, its evolutions are wonderful to behold, its old-time name of "wheel-bird" being singularly apt. It can loop, swerve, or mount without a shadow of effort, and can suspend its light body almost motionless in space for an indefinite period.

The brooding bird, when sitting, presents a curiously toad-like appearance, or may readily at a casual glance be mistaken for a piece of dry wood or bark. The birds become silent soon after the young are hatched, and when the first tang of frost creeps into the early autumn nights, they take wing as mysteriously as they came to a land of warmer memories.

## CHAPTER XIV

### VIPERS

THOUGH scarcely attractive, the viper is not by any means an uninteresting reptile. It is one of those creatures about whom many curious ideas have arisen in the course of time, for the simple reason that comparatively little is really known of this snake and its history. Most country people regard the adder purely as a "snake in the grass", a thing to avoid when unsubstantially shod, whose presence is declared either by a menacing hiss—not frequently heard—or a sinuous rustling among the dry leaves as the lean gliding form trickles away from the heavily vibrating human footfall.

As a general rule, vipers are more troublesome in early spring, when they first emerge from their winter sleep, sharp of tooth, sharper of temper, and full of venom. Lean and vicious, they appear to court rather than shun observation at this time of year, and, instead of retreating at the approach of danger, they assume a menacing attitude—defensive no doubt from their point of view—and they are quick to interpret the unwitting advance of man or beast into an act of war. Later, when they have shed their skins, they become shy and wary, trickling away into the brushwood at one's approach, rarely

biting unless actually molested. In the heat of the day, however, their sleep is sound even at mid-summer, and I have repeatedly seen one basking upon some sunny bank, curled into a compact ball, quite unconscious of inspection, but with the sinister, poison-bearing head always placed in the position best calculated for striking at any unwary foot or nose that ventures to disturb the reptilian slumbers. Like a hare, a viper makes a little "form" in the grass about the circumference of a cricket-ball, into which it compresses its coils, and to this it returns day after day if undisturbed.

Warmth-loving creatures, they are always bad-tempered during cold weather, being uncomfortable and wakeful in consequence. Once in March, with snow upon the ground, I heard a curious hissing sound from the depths of a gorse-bush, and upon investigation found a large viper, coiled, but with head erect, making threatening dabs at me from its lair among the roots. It had doubtless crept out from its winter retreat before the time for some reason, and was still in a semi-stupefied state. Upon another occasion, near Dart Head, I came across one in a somewhat similar case, which refused to retreat although poked up with a stick, and last year in Taw Marsh a curious little incident occurred. One cold early May afternoon, I had accompanied a friend on a fishing expedition, my part being that of spectator, and, as the trout were not rising and frequent wintry showers made lingering upon the river-bank anything save enjoyable, I walked off for warmth and exercise, accompanied by two dogs, a Labrador and a terrier, who testified their approval

by assiduous activities in the heather. It came on to rain again, and I was looking round for a sheltered rock when the attitude of the dogs attracted my attention. They appeared to be interested in something upon the ground, and going to the spot, I soon espied a viper in a little open space before them. Half uncoiled, and about midway between them, it was facing the two dogs, making quick angry darts at each in turn. One or both would certainly have been bitten but for my arrival. At sight of me, however, the viper appeared to decide that the game had become too uneven, and after one quick look in my direction, it flashed aside into the heather. That reptile at any rate, if cold, was far from sluggish, and apparently could have made good its escape at any moment if so disposed.

A month later, that same Labrador had a decidedly unpleasant experience with another member of the viper fraternity. The incident occurred near Fur Tor, in the heart of the Forest, and the precise details of the meeting are known only to the creatures directly concerned. Suddenly missing the dog, I looked about, and eventually saw him limping along some distance behind, having, as I supposed at the moment, injured himself among the rocks. Investigation, however, proved the injury to have been, not one but four viper bites upon the chest, and long before he could be got to the car, which was five miles away, the dog displayed every sign of acute distress. Within a few hours he was in a state of coma, remaining seriously ill for several days. One would have given much to have known the full story of that encounter. It seems more than probable

that the dog attacked the snake, or came upon it suddenly in some position from which there was no retreat. The number and position of the bites suggested that the reptile must have coiled round his leg for the purpose of striking, while the virulence and circulation of the poison rather pointed to the possibility of more than one viper having been concerned in the affray. The close proximity of the bites, however, rendered this improbable. Matters in this case were aggravated, no doubt, by the time that elapsed before first aid could be rendered, and the distance which the dog was compelled to walk, motion having the inevitable effect of circulating the poison.

Conventionally, the first bite only of a venomous snake should be dangerous, the theory being that the worst of the poison is then expended. One bite, however, rarely produces serious consequences in a large animal. According to medical evidence, a single bite conveys sufficient venom to cause the death of a small bird or mammal, and should not involve anything more serious than a certain amount of local disturbance, and, of course, considerable general discomfort to any larger creature or to a human being. The first symptom of the poison taking effect is usually nausea, after which the affected part swells rapidly, and the animal becomes listless and indisposed to stir. Much depends upon the position of the bite. I have known death ensue in the case of a spaniel which received a wound on the tongue. Again, the shock to the heart might easily prove too much in the case of highly sensitive or delicate dogs, such as whippets, or small beagles, in which

cases comparatively slight injuries not infrequently have fatal consequences. Old-fashioned farmers cherish the firm belief that viper bites are responsible for the loss of many sheep and even cattle. There can be no doubt, however, that such accusations are founded upon the almost superstitious fear in which all snakes are regarded in certain districts, the death of the animals being due to inflammation brought about by purely natural causes.

There is a prevailing idea that the adder seldom exceeds twelve or fifteen inches in length. Erroneous as this notion is, one frequently encounters it. It is a little difficult to see why there need be so much argument as to the precise length of any creature, since one seldom finds two representatives of a species that are in any respect entirely identical. Wild creatures vary in size almost as much as human beings or domesticated animals, and there is no greater mistake than to imagine that identity can be decided merely by measurements.

According to old naturalists, the viper attains full growth when six or seven years old, but upon that point I cannot speak with authority, merely accepting the statements of others who have observed the reptile in a captive state. The actual length may reach anything from one to two feet—or even more in exceptional cases, much depending upon the locality in which it is found. Setting affects the physique of animals far more than is commonly supposed, and this has led to considerable confusion in certain cases, creatures of the same species which differ only on account of environment being frequently classified as distinct races.

Adders, it would seem, thrive best upon sandy soil, and naturally are not so abundant upon high exposed ground or peaty country, such as the "veins", although occasionally one comes across them in the most unexpected localities. In the warm-lying coombes they are numerous, particularly in such places as Wistman's Wood and Black Tor Copse, where one may see several in the course of a morning's walk. Speaking for England as a whole, the species occurs only locally, and in certain districts is quite unknown. It cannot exist in really wet country, and though partial to the outskirts of low-lying humid swamps, dry banks in which to hibernate are essential.

The age-old controversy upon the question of vipers swallowing their young when alarmed has revived considerably within recent years, and through the medium of the *Field* a reward of £10 has been offered to anyone who can supply incontestable proof of such an occurrence. Impossible as it seems, there are men in this locality who lay positive claim to having actually witnessed this extraordinary performance, and in the face of direct assertions one hesitates to express unqualified incredulity. Here again one can only remark that every questionable action in connection with wild animal behaviour has been vouched for by "reliable" witnesses, and if all such statements are to be accepted without reserve Natural History would quickly develop into a complicated study indeed. The difficulties of belief in the present case are numerous, but most insuperable perhaps is the question of time. The act of swallowing even one young viper could scarcely be other-

wise than a lengthy proceeding, and if the reptile can indeed absorb its entire family within the space of a few seconds, it must be a singularly gifted creature, particularly when one remembers that the adder is viviparous, its brood numbering as many as fifteen—a liberal mouthful. It is probably the celerity of the proceeding that deceives the observer. At the first hint of alarm the young dart away, disappearing as if by magic under the stones or leaves, and the intruder not unnaturally assumes that the gaping menacing jaws with which the parent confronts him provided the avenue of escape. One cannot but think that the young alleged to have been found in a female viper's interior upon such occasions must have been unborn, which is the probable solution of the riddle.

The difference between the poisonous viper and its next-of-kin, the harmless grass, or ringed snake, is wide, yet not sufficiently pronounced to render confusion impossible or even unaccountable. Naturalists talk about distinctive markings; the viper's spade-shaped head; the V mark; the "oak-leaf pattern", or zigzag line running down its back, as compared with the double row of spots that a grass-snake shows. Unfortunately for the inoffensive variety, however, there is seldom time in which to study details; five times out of six one catches but an indistinct glimpse of a sinuous form gliding away into the undergrowth, and people are apt to strike first and look afterwards.

Colour stands for little, depending largely in each case upon surroundings. The viper, who should be brown, displays a distinctly olive tint against certain



backgrounds, whereas the green grass-snake as often as not wears a suit of greyish brown which can easily be mistaken for the poison-bearer's garb. Indeed, say what one will, a practised eye is sometimes required to identify either species at a glance. At close quarters there is little fear of confusion. The grass-snake wears a clearly defined collar ; the viper merely two spots at the back of the head, and these sometimes invisible. The former may measure forty inches, the latter seldom exceed two feet, and comparatively few live long enough to attain full size. The one ripples along, the other glides with scarcely perceptible undulations. None the less, cases of mistaken identity *will* occur, and he who makes a practice of destroying the poisonous variety might do well to remember that it is better that a venomous reptile should escape now and again than that its harmless and indeed useful congener should be accidentally killed. In their way both these snakes do good service to the agriculturist, the grass-snake being particularly useful upon land where slugs and such pests abound, while the adder's diet is practically omnivorous, consisting of small life of every description, and it is only reasonable to suppose that a certain number of harmful as well as inoffensive insects and small mammals are destroyed. That it wreaks great destruction amongst small bird-life upon the moors is unquestionable, however, since the majority of moorland birds nest upon the ground, both old and young falling easy victims. Last season upon the Taw I came across the nest of a long-tailed tit in a gorse-bush. It was full of young birds, and from the position of the nest I had little

fear that harm would befall them, since it was situated in such a manner that even the weasel could not climb within dangerous proximity of it. Upon visiting the spot again, however, I found the nest empty, a small hole in the bottom and other evidence of tragedy leaving little doubt as to the fate of the occupants. The position, though unassailable by any four-footed creature, had presented no difficulties to the sinuous viper, which had obviously crept up the perpendicular branch which supported the nest, and, securely coiled, accomplished the dark deed at its leisure.

One often wonders how and when a viper commits its depredations. Its carnivorous propensities can always be established by the simple process of a post-mortem, but seldom does one see the sinister hunter actually at work. I once came upon him with a young thrush in his jaws, and upon another occasion a brooding robin, missed from her nest, was found *inside* a gorged viper which lay coiled and comfortably sleeping within a few yards of the plundered home. These, however, are rare instances. One might naturally expect to see more of the viper's activities when observing other wild creatures. On a warm sunny afternoon one notices the shrews and field-mice coming and going upon "their furtive affairs intent"; the lizard trickles along the dry ditches; even the blind-worm frequently wriggles across the moorland path, but the far more rapacious viper is rarely in evidence, and whenever one sees him, morning, noon or evening, he is almost invariably *asleep*. It would be interesting to know when as a general rule he bestirs himself in search of food,

and how far afield he wanders. I once met an adder far out on the bare arid waste of a Dartmoor hill-side, a considerable distance from cover of any description. The heather, burned to its very roots the previous year, offered no protection, and the ground was utterly devoid of grass or verdure. There was not even a crevice between stones, and one could only assume that the reptile had ventured so far from home in search of larks' nests. On wet cold days, as a general rule, they are not seen, and one is justified in assuming that these little snakes, like the giants of their race, eat heartily, but seldom, one full meal sufficing perhaps for a day or two. Another curious circumstance is the skill with which they conceal their winter whereabouts. I have yet to meet the hedger, quarry-man, or winter delver of any description who has unearthed a hibernating viper, though one reads of frequent instances, particularly in the olden days when all manner of curious things—even hibernating swallows—came to light. Wherever they sleep, their quarters must be snug and well chosen.

Little as mankind has to fear from the viper, many West-Country people are exceedingly timid of the reptile. On bright mornings even children will scarcely venture from the path when crossing moors where the object of their fear is said to lurk. I have only heard of one case of a child being bitten, and in this instance the result, though serious, was not fatal. This child, a little girl of six, inadvertently placed her hand upon the reptile when whortleberry-picking, receiving the poison in her arm. She speedily lost consciousness, in which state she was

carried home, but ultimately made a satisfactory recovery. I once saw a hedger—a level-headed man enough—chopping stolidly at a briar-patch, when suddenly he gave a horrified yell and sprang away from the bank with incredible activity. Upon my inquiry as to whether he had severed a finger, he replied laconically, “a hadder”, and pointed to a bush into which he had flung his hook in sheer terror. There, sure enough, was the reptile by curious chance cut clean in two by the wildly thrown missile.

The village housewife under no circumstances will keep a kitten born in May, since a “May cat” is accredited with the reprehensible habit of bringing in “snakes”. Whether a cat would actually interfere with a viper is more than doubtful, since the outcome of such an indiscretion might prove disastrous. The accusation is not entirely unfounded, however, since kittens born about this time naturally begin to hunt just at the period when small reptiles are most in evidence. The “snakes” in this case usually prove to be nothing more than the young of blind-worms or lizards, but that is beside the point, so far as the country-woman is concerned, all species to her being alike.

Officially, a snake-bite is treated nowadays by the prompt injection of permanganate of potash. The old remedy of olive oil may be applied with advantage, however, as an outward application, while a still older recipe consisting of boiled ash-tops, applied both externally and internally, is frequently employed with apparent efficacy, but whether this is in a large measure a survival of old-world superstition rather

than an actual cure of established merit is an interesting question. The ash-tree has long been regarded as a plant inimical to snakes and their poisons. Pliny states that if a snake is placed near a fire and both are surrounded with ashen twigs, the reptile will choose rather to creep into the fire than cross the ash branches. The same idea is seen again later in the old West-Country belief that if a circle is traced with an ash wand round a sleeping adder, the creature would be unable to pass its bounds. It is more than probable that the veterinary lore of the earlier sportsmen had at least some foundation in these traditionary beliefs. A teaspoonful of brandy should be administered as soon as possible in all cases, and will be found more beneficial than whisky, the usual effect of which is to cause vomiting.

In this part of the world, the country-people still firmly believe in the efficacy of certain charms for adder-bites. A somewhat famous setter belonging to John Bennett was once bitten on the head when out on the Moor. The head swelled to an enormous size, and, fearful of losing the animal, he hurried to the nearest village where lived an old woman reputed to be highly skilled in charms and other forms of white-witchcraft. He briefly described what had happened, whereupon the old lady merely inquired whether he had killed the viper. His reply being in the affirmative, she immediately assured him that the dog would recover, taking no further apparent interest in the case. No visible or audible charm was employed, but he "reckoned she said something to herself", and, perfectly satisfied, he took his dog home. Within an hour or so the setter's head had

resumed its normal appearance, and the cure was complete.

Expert opinion appears to differ upon the question as to whether an animal that has repeatedly been bitten becomes in the end less susceptible to the effects of the poison. Medical men whom I have consulted on the matter have replied in the negative. On the other hand, a neighbour of mine, an old M.F.H., with life-long experience both of dog-breeding and hunting upon the Moor, assures me that successive bites have rendered certain of his dogs immune. Incidentally, the bite of a female adder is said to be more venomous than that of the male, and since she is also more ready to strike upon the slightest provocation, they would appear to be in every way the more dangerous.

Returning to the subject of "treatment", equally extraordinary, though perhaps more accountable than the conventional "charm", were some instances recorded a year or two ago in the correspondence columns of the *Shooting Times*, when almost immediate relief has apparently been afforded by the simple expedient of placing a hazel wand round the neck of a bitten dog. Incredible as they may seem, these instances have been positively vouched for by the dog owners, and, though inevitably sceptical, one cannot flatly refuse to accept plain statements of apparent facts. Hazel wood admittedly possesses unusual properties, such as that of water-divining, and within the bounds of possibility may exercise curative powers as well. I might add that in the same spirit of scepticism I have gone so far as to put this remedy to the test. It happened that my

Labrador, whose encounter with a Fur Tor viper so nearly proved fatal, was bitten again later in the same season, and mindful of previous experience, my wife insisted upon trying this harmless if useless remedy. A convenient bush being to hand, the dog was soon provided with this unaccustomed type of collar, and, sceptical or no, it must be admitted that upon this occasion he certainly suffered very little discomfort. It must be stated, however, that other circumstances may have contributed to this end, the accident occurring later in the year when the poison is less virulent, the bite also being received this time upon the hard part of the muzzle—a far less vital part than the body. In this instance, again, the dog was spared the effort of a long walk home, official first aid being rendered within a comparatively short time. All considered, therefore, the case can scarcely be considered as convincing.

## CHAPTER XV

### DARTMOOR HUNTING

NEAR the Parish Church of Widecombe-in-the-Moor there stands a venerable yew-tree upon which in bygone years it was the custom to display all foxes destroyed within the parish. There were no legitimate fox-hunters in those days, it would seem, and it was a more or less general practice throughout the country to pay small rewards out of the local rates for the killing of rapacious creatures. Badgers, polecats, and even hedgehogs fetched their price, but the fox, as principal malefactor, headed the list, his life being valued at no less than three shillings and sixpence. This system only ceased to operate early in the nineteenth century, and was carried on unofficially by farmers' clubs and similar institutions until a much later date. Doubtless the morals of the West Countryman have improved somewhat in this respect with the passing of the years, yet even to-day he has his own ideas about foxes and the fox-hunter, regarding the latter very much as he regards the police—merely as a last resource in times of need, a means to an end which he cannot himself achieve. His attitude, indeed, resembles that of the gipsy, cleverly sketched in *Punch* some years ago, who, having knocked down a fox in front of hounds,



was genuinely astonished when his action was greeted with anything save approbation. A characteristic example occurred in this neighbourhood a few seasons ago.

A farmer living in a remote village wrote to Major Upton, then Master of the Eggesford, to the effect that a fox was making frequent raids upon his poultry, and he would esteem it a favour if hounds could be brought. The Master agreed to come, fixing and advertising an early date. That particular bit of country, as it happened, belonged to the South Devon Hunt, who never made use of it. He took the trouble, therefore, to obtain the customary formal permission, and all was satisfactorily arranged when, upon the very morning appointed, there came another letter from the good farmer intimating that he "need not trouble the gentlemen, after all", as he had succeeded in *trapping* the delinquent.

Upon the wilder parts of Dartmoor foxes have seldom been more than nominally preserved for hunting, and within the memory of many residents the greater number of farmers kept greyhounds for coursing them, much as the prairie farmer of to-day keeps similar animals for running down coyotes. This appears to have been a rough-and-ready form of sport and distinctly one-sided. Indeed, it must have resembled the Border hunting, so-called, of Dandie Dinmont's days. Both guns and terriers were used, the former to be brought into play whenever occasion arose, the latter for ejecting the foxes from the clitters. If they would not bolt, crow-bars were employed to get them out, and short shrift was granted, whereas those which bolted stood slight

chance, for even if they escaped the guns, there were the greyhounds to be reckoned with. In an old farmhouse in the parish of Throwleigh visitors are still shown a string of twenty-four brushes, all trophies of this now happily forgotten "sport".

With such a state of affairs more or less general throughout the district, one can readily believe that the task which confronted the pioneers of orthodox hunting was no light one, since a community that had been accustomed to pay bounties for the destruction of foxes was scarcely likely to welcome any attempts to preserve them for the purposes of sport. Such being the case, it would be interesting to know the true version of a century-old story told against Mr. John C. Bulteel, who was one of the most prominent sporting characters of the period. As the tale runs :

A popular squire of the county . . . is said to have driven his carriage in hot haste to a convenient spot, thrown open its doors and emancipated a host of French and English foxes upon the wilds of Dartmoor.

The narrative goes on to relate how "the poor man's goose on the common" suffered in consequence, and that "even the farmers' hen-roosts in Widecombe were assailed with no ordinary daring and ferocity". The alien foxes indeed appear to have enjoyed themselves immoderately at the expense of the neighbourhood, and in self-defence the farmers and other parishioners appointed a certain Tom French principal fox-killer for the district. With the aid of terriers, an old hound or two, and doubtless other kindred spirits, this individual embarked upon a war of extermination, so far at least as the aliens

were concerned, and soon succeeded in reducing the number of the undesired "settlers".

Such is the story as handed down to posterity, Bulteel's action being represented in the light of a practical joke. One ventures to suggest, however, that his side of the affair was never accurately stated. The date of the episode does not transpire, but everything indicates that it occurred during his mastership of the country now known as the Dartmoor. The hunt must then have been in its infancy, and with the gibbet-tree at Widecombe still fresh in the memory of many moormen, it is not likely that foxes were numerous upon the hills. The action of the M.F.H. in enlarging a number of foxes suggests a desperate attempt adequately to stock the country rather than a mere prank, and one may perhaps be excused for suspecting that Mr. French's activities as professional fox-catcher were the cause rather than the result of the "popular Squire's" action. It is only reasonable to assume that extreme scarcity of foxes alone would have induced Bulteel to undertake the expense and difficulty—very considerable in those days—of procuring a fresh supply from overseas.

That foxes were scarce throughout Mid-Devon there can be no doubt since we read of Templar in the early "twenties" being under the necessity of maintaining a supply of "bagmen" for enlargement upon the Moor when unable to find a wild fox, and again that King, hunting the country now known as the South Devon, in the season 1828-9, as the result of seventy-five hunting days could bring to book no more than seven and a half brace of *bona-fide* foxes,

and was also under the necessity of running "bag-men". These, it should be remarked, were not necessarily imported animals. The sportsmen of a century ago appear to have supplemented the limited supply by the simple expedient of saving a fox alive whenever possible, and turning him down again in his own country, and reprehensible as this practice may well be, it certainly compares favourably with the too prevalent trick of enlarging a semi-domesticated animal among surroundings with which it is unfamiliar.

That conditions have changed somewhat with the lapse of a century may be gathered from statistics, and the fact that the disparity is not so great, everything considered, as might have been supposed, is a striking tribute to the efficiency displayed in the face of great difficulties by the sporting giants of long ago.

Beginning with the South Devon Hounds, the figures, kindly supplied by Mr. E. J. F. Tozer, hon. secretary to the Hunt, and author of the interesting and comprehensive book upon its history, read as follows :

Season 1827-28	.	.	10 brace of foxes killed.
1828-29	.	.	7½ " " " "
1829-30	.	.	13½ " " " "
1830-31	.	.	20 " " " "
1831-32	.	.	23 " " " "

Then passing over nearly a hundred years, the list records :

Season 1925-26	.	.	28 brace.
1926-27	.	.	24½ "
1927-28	.	.	19½ "
1928-29	.	.	Not stated.
1929-30	.	.	14 brace.

## 288 DARTMOOR IN ALL ITS MOODS

The Dartmoor Hounds, hunting for the same period on the opposite side of the Forest, have shown an average for the past ten years of  $29\frac{1}{2}$  brace of foxes killed, their best record being :

Season 1924-25	.	.	.	$34\frac{1}{2}$ brace.
----------------	---	---	---	------------------------

their worst

Season 1928-29	.	.	.	$24\frac{1}{2}$ brace.
1927-28	.	.	.	$25\frac{1}{2}$ „

It is interesting to note that King's low record for the season 1828-9 should correspond exactly a century later with a bad season for Dartmoor hunting as a whole, bad weather during the latter part of the season being mainly responsible for the comparative failure of the modern packs, but whether this was also the case a hundred years ago is a question the solution of which might be of value to students of the weather-cycle theories.

It will be seen therefore that, all considered, the passing of time has improved the position of Dartmoor hunting generally, so that possibly Mr. Bulteel's efforts were not altogether unavailing, in spite of Tom French's campaign of destruction. It is interesting to note that Rowe refers to a strain of foxes "on the southern side—the regions of Ivybridge to Huntingdon Warren", which in his day were supposed to be of "Continental extraction", and, assuming that Bulteel's turning-down experiments were not confined to the Widecombe districts alone, it is not difficult to connect this strain with the foreign animals whose introduction so dismayed the poultry-keepers of the latter village.

But even after the vulpicide practices of Tom

French and his kind had been renounced, and a moderately plentiful supply of foxes acquired, the methods employed by the legitimate fox-hunters of the nineteenth century appear to have been somewhat too efficient, and upon at least one other occasion it became necessary to reinforce the strain upon the country north of Postbridge and Princetown. This was effected many years ago by the importation of a number of mountain foxes from Ayrshire, and since that date there has been no complaint of shortage in this particular region. Indeed, nowadays, oddly enough, the position has been reversed, the district in question having been drawn upon freely in recent years for supplies of cubs with which to restock the "in country".

There appear to be no definite records available as to the dates when hunting in the modern sense of the word actually began upon the moors, beyond the fact that no mention of foxhounds or harrier packs can be traced to an earlier date than the beginning of the nineteenth century. One is safe in assuming, however, that Dartmoor hunting, like a great many popular institutions, evolved from chaos, and from the keeping of a few hounds upon the part of some sporting moorland squire, there gradually developed the elaborated system of the present day. Whereas about 1830 we read of Carew and Bulteel more or less officially established and apparently dividing Southern and Central Devon between them, the country which they monopolized is now hunted by no fewer than nine packs of foxhounds and harriers, not to mention various others that from time to time enter the district to hunt by invitation.

Such being the case, it is distinctly curious that the wildest part of the Moor, including many of the principal fox strongholds still inhabited by descendants of the sturdy "Broadbury tiger" strain, remains to this day practically untouched by hunting. This region includes the wilds of Tavy Head, Black Tor Copse and the higher Okement Gorges, Yes Tor with its dependencies, and the magnificent hound country lying south-west of the Artillery Camp. The greater part of this district is included within the South Devon boundaries, but is too remote to be hunted regularly by that pack, and owing to its inaccessible position and other causes has never been leased to an "in-country" hunt.

This forms the northern section of the country formerly hunted by the Mid-Devon Hounds, a pack that ceased to exist on account of wartime difficulties, and has never been revived upon a permanent basis, although Mr. Raleigh Phillpotts has periodically taken over a considerable part of it by arrangement with the South Devon.

At one time few moorland valleys heard the cry of hounds more frequently than the West Okement Gorge and Black Tor Copse. The clitters flanking the steep shoulder of High Willhayes and the immovable rocks which form the base of this primeval wood offer sure sanctuary to any fox that can reach them, and a run which began anywhere within three or four miles of Yes Tor was more than likely to end among the stunted oaks of wild Dartmoor's largest natural covert. It constituted at one time an almost certain point from the Taw, East Okement and

Blackavon valleys, or from Belstone rocks, and when hounds were due to draw almost any country west of the Taw, anyone riding the Mill Tor ridge about midday was tolerably certain to intersect them as they crossed the ranges upon their accustomed line for Yes Tor or Dinger, and Black Tor Copse. Nowadays several seasons may pass without a hound note disturbing its echoes. Few foxes run there, since few are found within reasonable distance of its solitudes, and owing to its remote position it is very seldom drawn. Foxes were always reluctant to quit its security, and, cut off as it is to a large extent by rock and bog, it is not surprising that fox-hunters of the present day are not anxious as a rule to make its more intimate acquaintance.

The Mid-Devon Hunt, which was perhaps in its day most typical of Dartmoor sport under the old conditions, came into being gradually. Beginning originally in the form of a harrier pack somewhere about 1850 or earlier, when Northern Dartmoor must have been a veritable No-Man's Land, it passed through many vicissitudes, its history somewhat resembling the story of the Handley Cross Hunt in its infancy. It even experienced the pedestrian stage, and was hunted at one time by a pack of "foot-harriers", which did not fear to try their luck against a fox as well as a hare. Unlike the northern fells, however, Dartmoor scarcely lends itself to hunting of this description. The difficult and peculiarly versatile nature of the country necessitates the use of hounds at least large enough to scale the rocks and jump the crevasses in the peat, but such hounds prove too fast for pedestrian followers when they



reach the open spaces which divide both the clitters and the bogs. In any case, the veins do not constitute easy country over which to run, involving almost incessant jumping with the alternative of wading perhaps knee deep in peaty mud and water. The conditions, therefore, could scarcely have been desirable for hunting upon foot, and it is little wonder that, as the local story goes, the pedestrian huntsman as often as not returned at nightfall from the hills "wi'out a hound at all". From foot harriers and harriers that hunted fox when chance arose, like Michael Hardy's pack, they at length aspired to the title of foxhounds, eventually acquiring full status as the Mid-Devon, under which name the Hunt was carried on until 1916.

A bulky file of old committee reports and statistics detailing the varying fortunes of the Mid-Devon Hunt, is before me at the moment, and a few figures illustrating the comparatively low cost of Dartmoor hunting under pre-war conditions might be of interest. Over a period of twenty years ranging from 1893-4 to 1913-14, this hunt appears to have been successfully run upon a subscription list that seldom reached the sum of £300 (a guarantee of £250). In the season of 1895-6 it exceeded that figure by £55, but for 1913-14 the receipts amounted to no more than £214 16s. That the funds scarcely met expenses can well be believed, and it is not surprising that the reports are punctuated by frequent appeals for further financial support. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the money sufficed, at least for the time being, and the disparity between the figures given and those set forth upon the recent balance

sheets of packs now hunting parts of the same and adjoining countries are significant.

The South Devon Hunt for 1929-30 records a total acquired by subscriptions and entertainments of something over £1,100, while the Eggesford for the same season and by similar means realized about £809, these figures, needless to say, in no way representing the actual expenditure. It must be remembered that a purely moorland pack is to a large extent relieved from the very considerable liability involved by a poultry fund, which, with its inevitable modern abuses, so impoverishes hunt finance at the present time. So far as one can judge from the statistics, the cost of "fox damage" to the Mid-Devon Hunt was negligible, seldom exceeding £10 in a season, whereas the South Devon Hunt paid £418 for poultry alone during 1928-9, and this sum would be considered little enough in many counties.

The question of a poultry fund under existing conditions is a difficult one. There are men who advocate its abandonment as providing a means by which to counteract the financial strain, and their argument at least deserves consideration. It is urged that the vast majority of claims are brought by persons who, after receiving compensation, seldom observe the clearly implied condition, namely, the preservation of foxes. Nor can it be denied that too many persons of a certain type supplement the compensation money with the additional price received for the fox's pelt. The Hunt funds are thus expended to no purpose, and general conditions remain unaltered. It is further argued that supporters of the chase as a desirable public institution wish for

no compensation ; that people otherwise disposed destroy foxes whether compensated or not ; and that the system by its frequent and obvious abuse has become little more than a byword in the country. Against this, however, there are always the " hard cases ", the benevolent neutral who loses birds through no carelessness of his own, and should not be called upon to bear the loss which in the case of a struggling smallholder might well be serious. The question, therefore, like many another, presents no satisfactory solution. Personally, I would suggest a revision of the system, a closer scrutiny of possibly fraudulent claims, and in the case of damage to crops or other private property in the course of actual hunting, the transference of responsibility from the Hunt to the individuals concerned. The difficulties are obvious, but not insuperable, and there can be little doubt that a consciousness of individual responsibility would go far to discourage the perpetration of wilful or unnecessary damage.

Dartmoor hunting offers a wide scope to keen horsemen and lovers of hound-work alike, since the character of the country is sufficiently varied to embrace both the worst and the best. Particularly characteristic perhaps is the Bellever district, from which a run may be obtained over practically any conditions that the Moor is capable of providing. There one may encounter stone walls without number, for it is the Tenement Country, and therefore a region of intakes, with wide sweeps of open moorland capped with rocky tors stretching away to the Great Bog itself. A run from the neighbourhood of Two Bridges may easily end upon Hangingstone

Hill or even Cranmere. Wistman's Wood and the historic Crockern Tor may feature in a Bellever hunt, while either fork of the rapidly converging Dart may intersect its course. For spectacular effect Widecombe or the Hey Tor country will scarcely be surpassed, and eminently rocky localities, such as the Teign Gorge or the Belstone district, offer perhaps the closest approach to "fell-hunting" that can be witnessed in Southern England.

The character of hunting that the Moor provides may not appeal to everyone. Its difficulties are numerous and a certain amount of experience on the part of both horse and rider is almost essential to full enjoyment. The rabbit-hole danger is not so great as in many hilly districts, although there are localities—particularly in old warrens—where considerable care in this respect is necessary. Rocks and bogs constitute the main drawbacks, and not infrequently a stranger finds considerable difficulty in avoiding them. More often than not "thrusters" from the lowlands dislike the Moor upon this account, since the tendency to stick closely to hounds is liable to land the enthusiast in serious trouble. As a rule, however, this is only a matter of acquiring the "Moor sense", which time and patience will provide, and the peculiar fascination of the sport is so great that few can resist its influence. All considered, serious accidents to man or beast are remarkably few—negligible indeed when compared with those which occur in the Shires or across a water-country.

The most formidable region of all is the Cranmere district into which comparatively few in-country

hunting people will venture. Here the best horse is powerless, and the stranger as a rule prefers to adhere to one or two prescribed tracks or "cuttings" through the peat. As these lie wide apart, however, leaving vast areas virtually impossible of approach, they are of little real value in hunting unless the fox proves particularly accommodating, and the difficulties presented by the country are so great that it is usually considered advisable to stop hounds before they enter the bog. The only modern huntsman who braves its terrors unappalled is Mr. Raleigh Phillpotts, who, when cub-hunting in August, at one time went so far as to meet at Cranmere Pool itself, thus bearding the lion in his den, or, more literally, challenging the foxes of the Veins to an even contest in their own almost inaccessible stronghold.

So far as their human followers are concerned, foxes that once enter the wilds of Cranmere have all the best of the argument. The one marvel is that they ever again forsake its interminable maze of dark fissures and waterways which offer such scope for limitless windings and doublings that two or three short-running foxes might defy the keenest pack of hounds indefinitely. Since foxes are numerous in the locality, the pack divides as a rule, eventually becoming dispersed over a wide area. Unapproachable upon horses, and with probably no certain indication as to the exact lines taken, it is not difficult to lose an entire pack for an indefinite period, particularly when the position is further complicated by mist, rain, or approaching night, and this is a contingency which the moorland huntsman or M.F.H. is not infrequently called upon to face.

Jack Lyne, the Eggesford huntsman, had a somewhat unenviable experience a few years ago when hunting in the Belstone country by invitation of the South Devon. Finding in Raybarrow Mire comparatively late in the day, he hunted his fox over White Hill and round the southern shoulder of Cosdon Beacon to Ivy Holts, and, skirting Skaigh Warren, worked back by way of Rabbit's Holt, the Blackaton Brook and Clannaborough Down to the heathery slopes of Kennon Hill where the hunted fox—or another—jumped up in full view. Away went the hounds at a killing pace across the open moorland towards Waterton Coombe and the head of the Walla Brook, gaining fast upon their followers—a circumstance which troubled their huntsman very little, since at any moment he expected to see them run into their fox. Nor had he any idea of danger until, as the pack topped the last stone wall above the Teign Head Newtakes, a member of the field who knew the country and its difficulties informed him with assured but disconcerting pessimism that he would see no more of his hounds for a day or two. His reply was frankly incredulous, but the prognostication proved only too well founded. Hunt officials, together with the few members of the field who “saw it out”, returned to Belstone some hours after dark, men and horses utterly exhausted and unaccompanied by a single hound. Long into the night the cry of the pack, or rather the several packs, could be heard pursuing innumerable and interminable lines through the mazes of the great morass, but how they settled their many interesting affairs will never be known. The following

morning, anticipating something of a hue and cry, I walked up on to the hills, from various points of which forlorn horn blasts sounded across the empty and now silent country. Several days elapsed, however, before the entire pack was recovered, the episode eventually closing without loss or disaster of any kind, which was the more fortunate since it happened in April, the season of newly born Scotch lambs—a constant source of danger with hounds unaccustomed to the Moor.

To the moorland huntsman the Scotch sheep has proved a veritable thorn in the flesh, the picturesque but irrepressible little alien having caused more trouble in one way and another than anything else upon the hills. In the matter of hounds, it is more than probable that the sheep deplores the circumstance as much as anyone, being the most direct sufferer. The attraction that it exercises is as irresistible as it is unaccountable, and it frequently happens that in-country packs, which give no trouble with the various breeds of sheep common to the lowlands, when brought to the Moor succumb to temptation the moment they encounter the little mountain animal. There appears to be something about the Scotch variety that is nearer to the wild creature—a possible hint of the deer or goat—that stirs the instincts of sporting dogs who do not seem to regard the queer little beasts in the light of sheep at all. In some hounds this tendency is quite incurable, while it is liable to break out even in packs that have become accustomed to the breed. Indeed, trouble upon this head has led to the resignation of more than one moorland M.F.H.

It is possible that the behaviour of the Scotch sheep has a demoralizing effect upon young hounds. The appearance of the curious little creature as it starts up like a roe-deer from the heather and scurries away unquestionably invites pursuit. Hounds in the delirium of the chase are always liable to be diverted by any animal that arises suddenly in their line. I well remember the disastrous case of a pony which led the Dartmoor Hounds from the path of virtue many years ago. The leaders of the pack had just topped a heathery ridge over which their fox had passed in view a second before, when a chestnut pony sprang up full in their line and dashed away. The hounds were doubtless half mad with excitement. It is probable, too, that the leaders in the hard burst were young members who had yet to learn discrimination in moments of high stress. But, however it happened, the sight of the half-wild little beast flying before them with streaming mane and tail proved an irresistible diversion. To cut a direful story short, the pony gave them a riotous five minutes in the open, and that was the end of him. The ease with which the best hounds can be led astray at times is astonishing, and the fictitious story recently published in a popular magazine of the runaway convict accidentally hunted down and killed by foxhounds on the wilds of the Moor is not outside the bounds of possibility.

Atmospheric conditions naturally affect hunting upon high altitudes to a very considerable extent. During one season the Mid-Devon Hounds were compelled to cancel seventeen out of sixty-five appointments on account of frost and fog, and since luck,



good or bad, for some unaccountable reason usually attaches to certain fixtures, more often than not the periodical week which the South Devon Hunt now devotes to the former Mid-Devon Country is curtailed by impossible weather. Mist is the most common as well as the most effectual deterrent. The hills are sometimes wrapped in mist for several successive days or even weeks, although the surrounding country may be perfectly clear. Moorland hunting, therefore, is frequently held up even when in-country sport is in full swing. Against this it must be remembered that the moors are open to hounds both earlier and later in the season than cultivated lands. It often happens, however, that the lambing-season of the Scotch sheep proves almost as serious a handicap as the claims of cultivation.

There is little cub-hunting of the stereotyped order, mainly for lack of anything in the nature of conventional coverts. Where there are gorse-brakes or woodlands adjoining the Moor, the customary methods may be employed, but for the most part the wide expanse of rock and heather is at the disposal of a cub equally with adult foxes, although he may not avail himself of his privileges. Cubs are perhaps more difficult to kill upon the Moor than might be supposed, owing to the numberless clitters from which they can only be ejected with the utmost difficulty—if at all. On the other hand, before they learn wisdom, they are apt to seek the false security of any chance pile of rocks, from which hounds sometimes extract them unaided.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Moor there is no lack of fox-stronghold, and the conven-

tional odds of four to one on the hunted might be extended considerably in the fox's favour. Earth-stopping being obviously out of the question since clitters and not holes constitute the fox's principal fastness, he is at liberty to avail himself of every advantage that the country affords, and, all considered, it is somewhat surprising that the proportion of success achieved by hounds is not even lower. In the course of forty-nine hunting days, I have known as many as thirty brace of foxes run to ground in unassailable strongholds, while in the season 1929-30 the South Devon Hounds actually earthed forty-two and a half brace—although these figures refer to their entire country and not to Dartmoor alone.

A Dartmoor fox may be bolted two or three times in the course of a run, "going to ground" upon his part not being the final proceeding usually understood by the expression. Strictly speaking, it is merely secreting himself among the rocks, much as his lowland representative might take refuge in an impenetrable gorse-brake. A fox will bolt from a small clitter before a terrier quite as readily as a rat before a ferret, and one may see more foxes bolt in the course of a single day upon rocky hills than during many years in the woodlands.

Good "points" are the rule rather than the exception, which circumstance goes far in support of the theory that good scent makes good foxes. It has been asserted by various old sportsmen that a bad-scenting day is unknown upon the Moor. This optimistic statement, however, scarcely needs contradiction. Scent, that mysterious and eminently unreliable quantity, can fail upon the Moor even as

elsewhere, although it is undeniably wonderful scenting country. To account for this various theories have been advanced, but it is probable that the absence of such upsetting influences as roads, dry fallows and tainted ground is mainly responsible for the circumstance.

The question is often raised as to what becomes of a fox who eludes his pursuers after a hunt. He lives to run again is the common—and as a general rule correct—expression. He is a sturdy beast, possessing vitality and recuperative powers of no mean order. On the other hand, when so thoroughly “run up” that he has not another sprint left in him it is doubtful whether he always survives. The moormen have a theory of their own upon this subject which may or may not be correct. Should a fox take refuge in a dry earth, the chances are that he recovers, they say, no matter how hard he may have run, as in that case he may rest as long as he pleases without suffering any ill effects. But if, on the contrary, he creeps into some wet or sticky place, he stands little chance, for then, in his heated condition he soon gets chilled, and is usually dead within a few hours.

All this, of course, refers only to extreme cases—to foxes that have been practically run off their legs. In the ordinary way a fox saves his brush with a far more comfortable margin, and after an hour or so is none the worse for the experience. On bad-scenting days many are lost almost as soon as found, while many more escape after a short run by any one of the numberless chances to which the hunted owe their lives.

With so many deer in Devonshire, it seems somewhat curious that the fox should so long have been the principal beast of chase upon Dartmoor, its largest waste. The red deer now occurs upon the Forest at rare and ever-widening intervals, nor has one been roused by hounds within its boundaries for many years, although two stags were found by the Eggesford Hounds at Berry Down, Sampford Courtenay, in the autumn of 1928. The deer which harboured at Lew Down in 1924 provided the nearest approach to Dartmoor stag-hunting seen within recent times, and since these stags adhered for the most part to the woodlands the Moor can scarcely claim them.

If old reports speak truly, a large herd ranged the Forest until about 1780, when it was destroyed by official mandate, and since that date, as far as can be ascertained, red deer have never harboured upon the tors for any length of time. Though abundant farther north, they seldom cross the intervening country, and only once within memory of living man has a hunted stag from another part of the county taken soil upon Dartmoor itself. The story of that hunt would be interesting, could one but give it in full, but, unfortunately, nobody ever knew the line the stag took or whence he came. One wild March afternoon when a late snowstorm was raging, terrified moormen, struggling homewards, heard, as they supposed, the phantom pack from Hound Tor Crags sweep past them in full cry through the blinding blizzard, and late that evening a sheep-farmer going to a little shelter near Shilston, was amazed to find the place full of great, strange hounds, huddled together in the last stage of exhaustion.

Startled, and utterly at a loss to account for the phenomenon, the man retired precipitately, nor did he venture to return until the following morning, when he found that the strange visitors had disappeared during the interval of darkness as mysteriously as they came, leaving only their semi-obliterated tracks in the snow as record of their presence. During the day, however, the riddle was solved. A boy, seeking cattle along the banks of the Taw, had been terrified by the apparition of a horned and grisly head protruding from a deep dark pool overhung by drooping willows. He fled at the sight, but his story led to investigation, and in due course a stag was discovered, still standing in the pool as he must have stood for twenty-four hours or more, stone dead and stark as a board.

Putting two and two together, it is not difficult to complete the story. Unattended for many miles, the hounds had followed their "pilot" through country unknown to hunters and hunted alike. Guided by instinct, the stag headed for the high peaks, made his point, and thanks to the storm-wind and the snow, shook off his pursuers. Unaware of this, however, and dead beat, he made for the river, took soil, and in a short time became too stiff to move. In which case the bitter cold, together with the effects of such a run, soon did the rest.

The Tiverton Staghounds have visited Buckland Woods within comparatively recent years, and Rowe records an occasion (in 1892) upon which the Dart Vale Harriers ran two hinds from the same district, one taking a line by way of Widecombe and Hamel Down to Grendon, where she was "left". The

various harrier packs which hunt the Moor at the present time, however, get no chance of a flight at such royal game, being obliged to rest content with the sturdy hare of the uplands—a by no means despicable quarry.

So far as actual hound-work is concerned, one could desire nothing prettier than moorland hare-hunting, apart from which there is an old world atmosphere about Devonshire harriers that is rarely encountered nowadays, except perhaps in Ireland. Possibly this circumstance accounts for its ever-green popularity among the country-people. One would suggest that it is the atmosphere of freemasonry inseparable from the “merry harriers” that appeals so forcibly to the native mind. However that may be, the appearance of the field that even now sets forth from a meet at a moorland village may only be described as refreshing. There one may see every sort and description of horse and rider, from the shaggy, half broken little moor-pony to the hairy-legged cart-horse fresh from the plough. I have seen a magnificent specimen of the latter variety thundering at a headlong gallop up a rough track leading to Cosdon Beacon with two corduroyed and muddy-legged rustics most uncomfortably astride its bare back. Another great attraction doubtless lies in the fact that the sport may be enjoyed by anyone, since the entire run can usually be viewed from some convenient point by pedestrian and indifferently mounted horseman alike. In this latter respect, however, Dartmoor hares are peculiarly apt to upset calculations. They come of a strain both tough and straight-necked, and astonish-

ing points now and again—particularly in “mad March”—testify to the prodigies of speed and endurance of which the sporting little hill “jack” is capable.

Inseparable from Dartmoor hare-hunting is the famous Bellever Week, an institution which by virtue of old tradition and historic interest is perhaps unique. One might almost describe it as the Ascot of the Moor, and formerly its attraction was scarcely exceeded by the immemorial annual gathering upon Cloutsham Ball. It takes the form of a four-day fixture in which two Moorland harrier packs participate, the week occasionally ending with a meet of the Dartmoor Foxhounds at Two Bridges. Formerly the packs which usually figured in the proceeding were the Dart Vale and the Modbury Harriers, and occasionally the Haldon by invitation. Latterly the Dart Vale and Mr. Spooner’s packs have played the principal part. In the old days it was usually a May fixture, which naturally strikes one as somewhat late for hare-hunting, owing to the risk of killing leverets or does with young. It must be remembered, however, that the backward character of the moorland spring makes the difference of at least a month in all such matters, and in any case the date has long since been relegated to April at latest to meet the requirements of the gradually shortening hunting-season.

Each pack meets once or twice within the week, according to arrangement, the great day being the Friday, sometimes styled Ladies’ Day, when the proceedings are crowned with a huge open-air picnic at midday on the summit of Bellever Tor, and it



A ROAD ACROSS THE MOOR

*From a water colour painting by Lord Gorell*





was always a point of honour that the refreshment provided for this occasion should be upon the most generous scale. The difference wrought by this interval in the general attitude adopted towards the many stone walls of the locality was remarkable in the "good old days". Far from avoiding the obstacles, they were eagerly sought by the majority of riders, the incredible but none the less perfectly true story of the in-country squire, who once under similar circumstances charged a low haystack in mistake for a hurdle, having many a parallel upon Bellever Day. The desperate nature of the riding may be judged by the fact that the meeting was always attended by a blacksmith, who, coming in a pony-cart from Princetown, brought a supply of cold shoes, together with the necessary tools for emergency repairs. A good story—one of a countless list—is told against a worthy sportsman who, clearing a wall in fine style, had the misfortune to drop his hat. It fell under the hoofs of his horse, which promptly trod upon it, effectually removing the crown and trampling it into the soil. A pedestrian onlooker with a sense of humour gravely restored the brim to its owner, who donned it, and so rode for the remainder of the day in blissful ignorance of the incomplete appearance presented by his head-gear.

Large crowds, conveyed to the meet in vehicles of every type, assembled to enjoy this popular fixture not so many years ago. It is popular even to-day, but its wide appeal, like that of some other events of mainly local interest, has now declined considerably, and though still attended by old residents

for association's sake, the proceeding has now degenerated into little more than a survival, the entire sporting population of the countryside no longer assembling as a matter of course.


As an open-air appointment, Bellever Day is naturally subject to every variety of weather conditions that the fickle spirit of the upland spring can produce. One has attended the meeting when the grim grey landscape beamed with all the warmth and fresh beauty of premature summer. One has seen it again when bitter hailstorms raced along the bare, gaunt heights, and biting winds that had swept the North Atlantic ice-fields cut shivering men and horses to the bone. And in the memorable spring of 1891 the arctic and tropical conditions were strangely blended, the heat being so abnormal that ladies rode in thin attire, while snow-drifts ten feet deep were heaped around the rocky summit of the tor.

The event has its significance, however, whether held in driving mist and rain, or under blue skies to the accompaniment of the skylark's song and the curlew's call. It is a notable milestone in the course of the moorland year, the grand finale of the hunting-season, a farewell feast to departing winter, a welcome to advancing spring. I should like to add that an excellent day's sport a year or two ago ended with a little incident which struck me as peculiarly consistent with the spirit of the occasion, the Master of the Dart Vale Harriers declining to press a hare that could obviously have been his with little further effort, remarking that she was "too good a hare to kill". That was a characteristic example of the Bellever atmosphere.

The actual feelings of a hunted animal present a problem which often troubles the more sympathetic type of sportsman, but in matters of this kind one must not fall into the common mistake of judging the animal from a human standpoint. Long observation has convinced me that animals do not experience that intense fear which is largely the outcome of a highly developed imagination. To scurry away from imminent and desperate danger can mean little more to the average bird or beast than the crossing of a crowded thoroughfare means to the modern Londoner. It is part of the animal's everyday existence, and just as the pedestrian re-crosses the street when so disposed, re-incurring the risk, so the animal accepts and avoids the dangers that beset its normal life as a matter of course. One finds and catches a blackbird entrapped in the fruit-netting. It is gasping, apparently from terror and exhaustion, and one thinks, when watching it flutter away, that after so terrible a fright it will leave the strawberry-bed very much alone in future. Forlorn hope. Within an hour it has re-entered by the old hole, and one has the same trouble over again. The foolhardy Lilliputian did not twice place himself at Gulliver's mercy, nor can one imagine any human being imperilling his life a second time in one morning for the sake of a strawberry or a black currant.

Sheer lack of imagination, I think, provides the answer to many questions that puzzle us in animal life. Take the case of a hunted fox, "disdaining", as he frequently does, to go near some great main earth where he could find perfect security. It is not that he *likes* being hunted—that is an absurd con-

tention—nor does he, like a soldier of fortune, voluntarily accept the risk involved in attempting to make some distant point. It simply means that he is in no actual distress at the moment. He is disinclined to enter that particular earth, preferring perhaps some other that he has in mind. His confidence in his own powers is unbounded, and it never as much as occurs to him to doubt his ability ultimately to make good his escape. It is only when the wrong number in the long odds is cast up against him, when his last shift has been tried and his powers begin to fail, that the “fear of death” which all of us must experience soon or late, is likely to take possession of him, and in such a case his time is mercifully short, the very exhaustion upon which the sentimental set such store doubtless in a large measure nullifying the bitterness of his passing.



## CHAPTER XVI

### ARCTIC DARTMOOR

DARTMOOR, being the highest ground in the South, inevitably bears the brunt of the comparatively mild southern winter, and since

He who ascends to mountain-tops shall find  
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow,

it is nothing unusual to leave the lowlands in perfectly mild weather and within the hour mount into an atmosphere of iron frost and generally Arctic conditions. The actual snowfall is not heavy, although the hills of necessity whiten more readily than the lower country, and retain their wintry covering for a longer period, while the wilder and most remote parts of the Moor invariably experience more severe weather than the outlying points, although perhaps of lower altitude than the hills more closely bordering upon civilization. For this reason, the wind that blows from Dartmoor is frequently the cold wind of Devonshire, quite regardless of the compass. At all times when snow-bound the Moor is formidable country, owing mainly to its wide sterility and desolation, and though the terrors of the upland storms have been perhaps somewhat exag-

gerated in old literature, their rigour and very considerable danger are not to be despised.

The 9th of March, 1891, is still famous in the West as the date of the "Great Blizzard", which, sweeping up with little warning, raged for thirty-six hours, isolating the Cornish Peninsula and Dartmoor in particular. So intense was the cold which followed the downfall that snow lay upon the hill country until early May, and old farm-labourers have told me that during the spring "tilling" many of the shaded headlands were still encumbered with deep drifts and could not be ploughed. A neighbour again tells me that, remarkable as it may seem, that memorable March, for all its rigour, proved to be the best lambing-season that he ever experienced. His flock, by curious chance, happened to be caught under the lee of an immense holly-hedge over which the driving snowdrift passed, leaving clear ground where the sheep lay, but piling up to form an impassable barrier beyond and around them. Imprisoned in this limited area they required close and constant attention, and for this reason survived the experience with a minimum of loss.

Many isolated farms and hamlets were completely cut off, some of them being virtually unapproachable for a matter of three weeks or more. Mr. Richard Dunning of Throwleigh, who was then Way-Warden of the district—an honorary office that has since lapsed—found himself under the necessity of requisitioning the services of a gang of men to cut a passage a mile and a half long through seven feet of snow, to enable a couple, whose passage had been booked to Canada, to walk from Murchington to Throwleigh

Church to be married. This was only one of many unusual experiences still remembered in the neighbourhood.

This particular blizzard for some reason has acquired an outstanding fame, although, according to existing records, it appears to have been no more severe than one which occurred in January, 1881, or another which swept Southern England on Boxing Day, 1886. Apart from these memorable instances, blizzards upon a less-outstanding scale are by no means uncommon, the storm experienced in February, 1929, being one of the most severe within recent years. Upon few previous occasions has the Snow King spread his mantle so thickly over the high moors, and seldom before have the beasts and birds, whose lot it is to pick a living upon the wind-swept mountain slopes, endured greater privations, since during the days of the Great Blizzard both cover and herbage were less scanty. It is at such times that the value of tall heather is demonstrated, since there are always areas where the ling-tips protrude from even the deepest snow, and this provides at least a measure of sustenance to starving sheep and cattle, and an effectual screen from the freezing blasts for birds such as grouse or black game. One man in the Yelverton district picked up as many as seven red grouse one morning, all frozen to death within a short distance of one another in a hollow where most of the birds of the district had presumably packed for shelter.

During this period considerable numbers of red-wings were also found, having perished for similar reasons. It is somewhat surprising that these birds



should remain in the country under such conditions, when even the indigenous ring-ouzel has sought more congenial winter quarters. One might naturally suppose that the redwings, coming as they do from northern lands, would be impelled by the same instinct to continue their migration at least to regions better adapted to their requirements. Members of the thrush family always appear to suffer greater hardship than most birds during severe weather, being mainly insectivorous, and a prolonged frost of unwonted severity is apt to take a heavy toll of song-thrushes and also of woodlarks, whose present scarcity in many moorland districts is attributed to this same frost of 1929.

A sparse carpeting of grass under the snow is of little value to cattle under such conditions. Both sheep and ponies will scrape for pasturage like deer in a similar case, but this is too lengthy a proceeding and the returns too negligible to keep starvation at bay, and while there are usually slopes upon which the herbage is whittled clear of snow by the wild winds, cattle more often than not shun such exposed altitudes. Those same winds, wailing across from Siberia, strike somewhat too keenly two thousand feet above sea-level to permit even hill sheep to browse in comfort. The animals are constrained to seek shelter in the coombes where they soon become engulfed in the drifts. Wonder is frequently expressed as to the manner in which entire flocks of sheep become buried upon such occasions, though in reality nothing could be simpler. As the pasture whitens under the fast-flying flakes, and the animals can no longer feed in comfort, they withdraw by

common consent to the most sheltered spot in the neighbourhood, and there huddle together for greater warmth, while the snow whirls and eddies around them, rapidly covering first the hollow or bank behind which they are sheltering and in due course the animals themselves. In a few hours they become entombed in a veritable snow-cave, from which they are quite incapable of extricating themselves.

Animals in such a case never die actually from cold, the great white mantle effectually protecting them from the bitter winds, and at the same time keeping in the warmth of their own bodies which is all that they require. The deeper the snow, the warmer the covering. Wild creatures very quickly discover this, and when snow lies long, even birds take to roosting upon the ground under sheltered banks rather than upon the bare boughs where they might literally freeze on their perches. An animal is in no danger of suffocation when buried under the deepest drift, the warmth of its breath always sufficing to keep a small hole open. "Beautiful" was the expression of a hill-farmer when describing the state of comfort in which he found his buried flock, and beautifully comfortable both wild and domesticated animals would remain under such conditions but for the all-important question of food.

The moorland sheep-farmer has heavy losses to face at such times, for the death-roll is frequently high. While his flock enjoys the run of almost unlimited pasturage during the summer months—and even throughout the year should the winter prove "green"—as often as not a spell of severe weather finds him entirely without alternative means

of support for his animals. They obviously cannot exist upon the hills, but neither can the owner bring them in, for the simple reason that he has no ground upon which to pasture them. Formerly the farmer, or rather his flock, was protected against such an exigency by the excellent old rule that I have previously mentioned, forbidding any commoner from running more sheep or cattle upon the moors than he could cater for upon his own land should the need arise, thus avoiding any risk of famine among the upland flocks and herds. This rule, though sensible in the main, cut both ways, since it more or less limited the use of the moor pasturage to the larger farmers. It has lapsed, however, and a succession of comparatively mild seasons has induced many smallholders and cottagers to invest their money in sheep, which, winter and summer alike, have to take their chance upon the hills. These are the animals which suffer such untold hardships when cold conditions set in with unusual rigour. Under existing circumstances, there is cause to fear that too many animals in the plight described remain undiscovered and perish miserably in consequence.

There is also another danger to which entombed sheep upon the moorlands are very liable. When hunger becomes acute, the animal naturally struggles to liberate itself. It frequently succeeds in forcing its head through the snow covering, but the task of dragging its heavy body through the aperture proves beyond its powers. The cavity in which it has been lying is no longer preserved by the warmth of its breath, and collapsing round the animal intensifies its predicament. The creature is thus held powerless,

and the grim moorland crow or raven is all too quick to note the sheep's distress and its own terrible opportunity. The eyeless corpse discovered by the owner a day or two later only too clearly tells the story of the tragedy.

The chill east wind, "good for neither man nor beast", must inevitably bring death to many of the weaker creatures, but it is the Frost King's stern satellite Famine which is the real enemy that animals have to dread. Generally speaking, moorland birds fare better than beasts during wintry conditions, it being an easy matter for them to take flight to less barren levels. A blizzard is usually marked by a large incursion of snipe from the frozen upland bogs, and in former years a cold snap was always the forerunner of contingents of golden plover and even black game to the in-country. The red grouse, being strictly resident, are the worst sufferers, owing to the obvious difficulty that they experience in obtaining their natural food, while rabbits, too, are frequently in a sorry case.

After a deep and more or less sudden fall of snow, rabbits make for their burrows if near at hand. If no underground shelter is available, they lie close, like hares, and once warm and comfortable, will not stir until compelled to do so by hunger. Then their troubles begin. In all the sheltered hollows where the best herbage grows, the drifts also lie deepest. They must dig for every mouthful they eat, and at the same time keep a sharp look-out for their enemies, the stoats and the foxes, who now have them at a disadvantage. There are few animals more helpless than hares or rabbits in deep soft snow. The actions

of a rabbit in a drift are both ludicrous and pathetic ; the little floundering hops, so different from his usual scuttling rush ; the miniature cloud of white dust from every briar or fern that he kicks in his hurry ; and the sudden bewildering turns which not infrequently baffle the most practised shot. He is woe-fully aware of his helplessness, for which reason he is naturally unwilling to quit any available cover. Indeed, as often as not, he sits too closely for his own safety, allowing himself to be snapped up by a dog or fox, or to be enveloped within the folds of a net before attempting to move. To the average countryman the catching of a rabbit that is sitting under snow presents no difficulty. He has only to follow the little footprints, detect the round hole in the white surface which betrays the rabbit's whereabouts, and the thing is done. I have seen five or six netted in this manner, or even caught by hand within a short space of time, with no more apparent effort than picking mushrooms. After a really heavy fall they will sometimes remain underground for two or three days, as I have proved by the simple process of studying tracks, and at such times hunger is the one inducement that will move them. Ferrets may do what they please, but their utmost efforts will scarcely dislodge a single rabbit, as many a half-frozen sportsman discovers to his cost. When wintry conditions continue for some days and rabbits become more or less acclimatized, they bolt more readily, but seldom really well when snow lies deep, though by a curious and quite unaccountable convention, such is the time selected above all others for ferreting in the West Country.

In the hare's case, snow can only be regarded as the great betrayer, for not only does it reveal her whereabouts, but it also deprives her of her one means of defence—her speed. Her long slender legs sink like stilts at every step, so that when danger threatens she can only plunge helplessly along and is soon exhausted. "Tracing" hares after a snow-fall is a favourite pastime upon Dartmoor among village youths of a certain type, the method employed being both simple and effective. The hare is tracked to her form, and, if possible, shot or netted where she squats. If she escapes, the "sportsmen" merely follow her trail, knowing that she cannot run far, and soon "hop" her again. She speedily becomes worn out, and after two or three scares, hare-like, throws up the sponge and allows herself to be taken. Incidentally, this practice was, and probably still is, illegal, unless it could by any means be construed as lawful under the provisions of the Ground Game Act. Possibly it is one of the many laws that has lapsed from long disuse. In the table of old game regulations one reads as follows :

14 and 15 Henry VIII, c. 10, inflicts a penalty of six shillings and eightpence for tracing and killing a hare in the snow.

The 1st of James I, c. 27, inflicts three months' imprisonment on the offender for tracing or coursing a hare in the snow ; unless the offending party pay to the churchwardens for the use of the poor, twenty shillings for every hare ; or within one month after commitment, become bound, with two sureties, in twenty pounds each, not to offend again in like manner.

It is an open question whether persons other than *bona-fide* occupiers of land might not still be held liable under this statute.

Carnivorous animals such as foxes and stoats are not materially affected by the cold. The fox, indeed, must regard arctic conditions in the light of an exceedingly useful catering for his needs. The inevitable death-roll among sheep and cattle provides him with a plentiful supply of fresh meat ; rabbits and hares are more easily procured, and, distance being no object with him, it is usually only a matter of going far enough to get what he wants. How far foxes travel is plainly testified by the snow, and of all places within my knowledge, the great Cranmere bog bears perhaps the best evidence of a fox's tireless activities. The waterways, when frozen, provide him with an ideal transport system, and the multitudinous tracks leading in every direction evince his appreciation of the convenience. Once, between Belstone and Tavy Head, I "balled", as I considered, fifteen foxes, after making due allowance for the possibility of crossing the same track again and again.

Owing to his wide-ranging habits, the fox is not exposed to quite the same danger as the hare. A certain number, however, are tracked into small burrows and clitters in which, under ordinary circumstances, their presence would never be suspected, their capture so becoming an easy matter. Two were caught in a little ground burrow in Taw Marsh after a slight snowfall a year or so ago.

During the prolonged frost of 1917 a state of general famine prevailed upon the Dartmoor heights. Every pool and swamp was ice-bound. Game practically disappeared, while the hill rabbits perished wholesale, as much, it would seem, from the effects

of the intense cold as from starvation. John Bennett picked up an astonishing number that had sought shelter and actually died inside the "splinter-proofs" on the ranges, to which rapacious birds and beasts—always hardier than the vegetarians of the wild—came to prey upon the poor perishing creatures. Carrion crows, ravens and an occasional buzzard were the most regular of the winged visitors. Foxes and stoats were in daily evidence—the latter, by the way, not infrequently turn white upon Dartmoor in midwinter—and there were traces of some other animal whose work he was unable to recognize, nor did he as much as suspect the stranger's identity until one morning, approaching a lonely little splinter-proof under cover of some rocks, he came face to face with an otter emerging from the shelter where presumably it had been feasting. So complete was the surprise, that though his gun was ready to hand, it never occurred to him to use it—a record, surely! The otter, surprised, too, sat erect on its haunches, stared at him for a few intense seconds, then scuttled away into a clitter near by.

Snow upon the high tors presents a beautiful sight. The storm-wind works its wildest fancies upon the bleak lonely heights, and after a blizzard, lovers of the grand and fantastic may feast their eyes upon snow effects rarely excelled in England. Peaty-brown and turbulent as ever, the still unfrozen streams come roaring down from the vast white silence of the hills, their dark channels here and there spanned from boulder to boulder by miniature ice-bridges, frozen spray from the numberless cascades festooning the rocks and overhanging bushes with



glittering ice ornamentations of every shape and form.

Most remarkable, however, of all frost effects upon the Moor is that wonderful product of the Ice Monarch's art known as the "ammil". This is witnessed when a rapid thaw after heavy snow is arrested by a sudden fall of the thermometer, or when sharp frost happens to coincide with wintry showers or mists of a peculiarly adhesive nature. The moisture, consolidating upon every twig, leaf, bracken frond or spray of heather, quickly forms an icy sheath over every particle of the plant or branch, sometimes far exceeding in volume the leaf or twig that it encases. A stick little larger than a straw may bear an ice-coat an inch in diameter, and so heavy is the cold covering that an upstanding mountain ash droops its branches literally to earth, like a laburnum or a weeping willow.

Thus every mountain ash or hawthorn upon the slopes or alongside the streams, every little warped larch in the upland spinneys or wind-bitten beech that tops the boundary fences, assumes the form of a glistening old-fashioned lustre; each heather-flanked tor becomes a dazzling diamond glacier. When viewed by the light of a brilliant frosty sunset, the wild rugged landscape presents an appearance of almost unearthly beauty, and when wind-ripples sweep along the hillsides with a sound that suggests the rattling of myriad fairy castanets the impression is as weird as it is unforgettable.

The most recent, and one of the most remarkable examples of this phenomenon that I have witnessed occurred in February, 1929, when even the villagers,

who seldom penetrate to the high moors, were enabled to view the spectacle in their own gardens. Such effects are not peculiar to Dartmoor, though sometimes represented as being so, and I have witnessed it upon several occasions in other moorland districts, though never in quite so impressive a setting.

The name "ammil" is in itself interesting. Its derivation from "ammel" or "amile", the old English form of "enamel", is obvious, the more so, as, curiously enough, except in this one instance, the word is never used in its old literal sense in the West Country. In Yorkshire, however, it is no uncommon thing to hear, in working-class households, the word "hammel" applied to enamel kitchen utensils, which leaves little doubt as to the connection.

The beauty of the moorland winter is not, however, its sole characteristic from a human point of view. It has its terrors, too, to which a long tale of fatalities bears tragic witness. The well-known story of Childe the hunter, recounted in every guide-book, might be told with only slight variation of many people whose lives have been lost from exposure to Dartmoor's more savage mood. The recent case of the boy lost in the Princetown district, whose dead body was only recovered after several days' search, is still fresh in local memory. But the danger is for experienced and inexperienced alike. The Moor has indeed claimed the lives of various men born in the very shadow of her peaks. In this village is an orphan child, whose father was one of four caught by a blizzard when crossing the wilds, some miles from a track or human habitation. Helpless in the silent blinding snow which rendered objects only a

few feet away invisible, the man became separated from his companions, and so the tragedy occurred. Snow languor, which some of us have tasted, in due course overpowered him, and exposure and bitter cold did the rest.

Indeed, those who know Dartmoor best have perhaps the highest respect for her caprices, and are most keenly alive to her dangerous possibilities.

## CHAPTER XVII

### DARTMOOR FLORA

SINCE my great endeavour throughout this work has been to avoid those specialized subjects which have already been exhaustively dealt with, so in this, the last chapter, I have no intention of giving a detailed botanical account of the flora of the moors, a subject which has already been thoroughly expounded by many competent authorities. No picture of Dartmoor in all its moods would be complete, however, without brief mention of some of the commoner plants that take their turn in painting Dartmoor's changing colour-scheme throughout the year, and whose blossoming and fading mark the passing of the seasons.

In most authentic lists of the moorland vegetation there are included the numerous species growing in the sheltered coombes and valleys of the outlying districts. Here the usual flowers of the southern lowlands, both common and rare, are to be located, and while it is, therefore, strictly correct to enter such plants as the wild roses, bluebell, succory, guelder-rose, corn marigold, cranes'-bills and mallows, these cannot be considered typical of wild Dartmoor. Indeed, the flora of the high uplands shows remarkably little variation, for it is only the

truly indigenous moorland plants of the hardest variety, supplemented by a few bold adventurers from lowland vegetation, that can survive the bitter winds that, winter and summer alike, prevail upon the barren slopes and ridges.

Of all four seasons, spring is perhaps the least colourful. While the russet of the bracken is sodden and decayed after the winter rains, the fresh green shoots of fern, heather and trees are scarcely apparent until early summer. Only a patch of the spring-flowering gorse (*Ulex europaeus*), not to be confused with its true moorland cousin, the autumn-flowering dwarf furze (*Ulex nanus*), here and there shows golden against the uniform brown and greys which constitute Dartmoor's winter garb, for though skies are blue and lark and cuckoo in full voice, she has not yet awakened from her long winter sleep.

With June, a green carpet is spread upon the hillside, as young bracken fronds uncurl; the few bushes unfold their leaves; and whortleberry and heather put forth new growth, while a stunted hawthorn or mountain ash, which, somewhat bolder than its fellows, has established itself upon a higher altitude, bursts into a cloud of white blossom. Bell-heather (*Erica cinerea*) begins to be conspicuous, for it is the earliest of the three *Ericas*, and I have seen isolated plants in bloom as early as January in a mild season. The pink blossom of the whortleberry—the billberry of the Yorkshire moors and the blaeberry of Scotland—also appears in early summer, its globular shape singularly resembling that of the berry that will succeed it in a few weeks' time. Though the whortleberry plant is abundant upon the Moor, in

some localities covering acres of ground, constant burning has reduced it considerably. I ventured to point this out to a commoner who was bemoaning the decrease of the whortleberry crop, but he solemnly assured me that swaling had nothing to do with the matter. "It was just that there didn't seem to be no young bushes coming on." I left it at that! Birds account for a certain number of berries, while nowadays the Scotch sheep nibble the plants down so closely in many places that sometimes only a meagre supply of fruit is to be found upon the lower stalks. Whortleberries, though affording excellent eating, are gathered and sold mainly for the dye which they yield, and Baring Gould supposes that the primitive inhabitants of the country were in the habit of staining their bodies with the juice in the same manner as other tribes in less-sterile districts employed woad for a similar purpose.

An exceedingly curious recipe for the use of this juice is given in an old book on edible fungi, in which the author states that if the scarlet-capped fly agaric fungi (*Amanita muscaria*)—usually considered deadly poison—are collected, dried and steeped in whortleberry juice, the innocuous liquor "acquires thereby the intoxicating properties of strong wine". He further remarks that "a day's intoxication may be procured at the expense of one or two of these fungi, and this intoxication is affirmed to be not only cheap but remarkably pleasant".

One of the first flowers to appear in early summer is the somewhat insignificant little milkwort (*Polygala vulgaris*) whose small racemes, white, pink and blue, are upthrust from among the heather. The

characteristics of this plant vary considerably according to environment, but after many years of disputation, botanists are at length agreed that its many forms are merely local variations of the one species.

The small yellow tormentil, the little heath bed-straw whose fragile white blossom belie its sturdy nature, sheep's-bit (*Jasione montana*) and sheep sorrel are all lovers of the heights, while patches of the white English stonecrop enliven the granite austerity of some of the highest tors. Wild thyme, though found upon some of the lower slopes, does not penetrate to the Moor proper. Golden rod is a handsome plant which usually occurs upon a river bank, but which I have also found growing among the tumbled rocks of a tor 1,600 feet above sea-level. Devil's-bit scabious, which thrives at a fairly high altitude, possesses a quaint old Devonshire name—forebitten moor. A "moor" in local parlance stands for root, and legend has it that the Devil, desiring to nullify the curative properties which the plant was supposed to possess, went round one night quietly biting off all the roots underground. In proof of this, it is only necessary to dig up a specimen of the devil's-bit to see that it does indeed present a "forebitten moor".

In summer, too, the bog-cotton unfurls its white flags, and the nodding, fluffy heads may be seen stretching for miles along the mires and marshy ground which constitute the home of gay dragon-flies innumerable. Ivy ranunculus and the marsh violet are two of the first bog plants to blossom. The pale, purple-veined flowers of the latter are some of the longest-lived, for appearing first about April, they

are often still to be found in moist situations in July. These are followed by the buckbean, whose trifoliate leaves and white flowers are easily recognizable in the somewhat rare localities where the plant is established. Round-leaved sundew is common alike in low and high bog-land, and the oblong sundew is also to be found, though occurring less frequently. Bog asphodel is a common and conspicuous plant, whose handsome yellow flowering spikes formerly went by the name of "madeyn-heere", for the plant yields a yellow colouring matter which was much in demand among young ladies for the purposes of a hair-dye in the days when golden heads were fashionable.

On lower altitudes one finds the usual bog species, such as red rattle, march hypericum and water forget-me-not, but these plants do not occur upon the high moors. Along most stream-beds, however, even as far out as the Brimbrook and the head waters of the Okement rivers, the valleys prove sheltered enough for occasional foxgloves—known locally as "cow-flops"—marsh thistles, pennyworts and golden saxifrage. Even the delicate-looking little ivy campanula spreads its tiny purple bells among the grass on wet banks and margins, far above its usual haunts.

But it is in the autumn that Dartmoor comes into her own and paints the hills with riotous splendour. August and September witness her carnival, for then the purple of heather, the gold of the dwarf furze, the russet and amber of "turning" bracken, and the scarlet berries of mountain ash combine to form a colour-scheme that is not easily surpassed.



The northern moors, with their rolling heather carpet stretching as far as the eye can reach, and broken only by a winding white road-ribbon, present a striking if somewhat monotonous picture. But there is no monotony upon Dartmoor, where a background of bare grey tor and clitter, or a patch of emerald bog or grass, only serve to throw into greater contrast the purples, reds and golds.

The autumn-flowering species of furze is a conspicuous feature of the uplands, and though the common gorse often shows a second blooming in the autumn, there is no confusing its larger and more straggling growth with the compact, tuft-like bushes of its mountain relative which resemble tight golden pin-cushions among the rocks and heather. One of the best examples of autumn colouring is to be seen on the moors above the Walla Brook, now so well known to every excursionist, where heather, stream, gorse, boulder, bog, circles, stone row, mountain ash and willow afford within amazingly small compass a characteristic picture of Dartmoor's kindlier mood.

Only three kinds of heath are found upon Dartmoor: the bell-heather, or fine-leaved heath (*E. cinerea*), the pale pink-belled, cross-leaved heath (*E. tetralix*), and the common ling (*Calluna erica*), which occurs in three distinct shades, and as these in many instances grow side by side, it is difficult to account for the variation in colouring. White heather is encountered fairly frequently, and one may depend with tolerable certainty upon finding a few sprigs in the same spot for several years in succession. Some localities are undoubtedly more favourable to

the growth of white heather than others, one slope of Cosdon, for instance, never failing to produce a fair-sized bunch each year, while upon the opposite side where the actual heather is much more uniform, I have never found a single spray. There is no mistaking the genuine article, though very pale, half-opened specimens of ling are sometimes proudly displayed as "white". The true plant, however, presents an altogether different appearance. The leaves are a much brighter green, and there is not the slightest hint or suggestion of pink on the pure white blossoms which usually catch the eye at a considerable distance.

A year or two ago, when walking along one of the artillery tracks near Dinger Tor, my attention was arrested by what appeared to be a large patch of whitewash upon the heather. As this commodity is freely employed by the military, I thought nothing of it, but upon reaching the spot, I found to my astonishment that what I had mistaken for whitewash was in reality heather. The bushes were mature, and close examination revealed the fact that many of them were even then in the stage of colour transition, for while some of the plants were entirely white, others bore white blossoms on one side of a stem and pink on the other. A small dump of rusty iron—fragments of burst shells—lay among the roots, and doubtless in this circumstance lay the explanation of the freak occurrence.

The heather of the high moors in these days compares unfavourably both in quantity and quality with the growth of forty or fifty years ago. The graphic description of an old moorman which I

repeat word for word, gives, I think, a fair impression of the altered conditions : " It warn't a bit the same years ago. The heather grewed as high as I be. It scainted the place, and you'd come home just the very same as a miller, wi' dust all ovver. Now it don't cover your boots, likely as not."

When the ling is in full bloom, one often comes across the full-grown larvæ of the oak-egger and emperor moths, both of which feed upon the heather and whortleberry plants. Although quite common, they are remarkably handsome insects, the former being a large black and brown caterpillar of the "woolly" variety, which rolls up and drops as soon as touched. As regards the latter, a beautiful bright green creature banded with black velvet which is dotted with orange spiracles, Bennett told me with an air of unmitigated disgust that he escorted a gentleman out shooting one day, and that the latter "took more notice o' they things than of all the birds he seed".

October and November are the months of bracken splendour, for when the first frosts nip the dying fern, the uplands present great sweeps of russet brown which persist throughout late autumn and early winter. There is much of romance attached to bracken, for it is a native of the romantic wilds, and one feels that solitude should dwell where bracken grows. It was the "magic fern" of old superstition, whose fabulous blue flower, possessed of so many remarkable virtues, was eagerly sought upon Midsummer Eve. Cut the green stalk, and on it will be found a perfect representation of the oak-tree, while the root, treated in a similar manner,

reveals the letter C, which standing for the holy name, *Christus*, rendered the bracken a plant to be dreaded and shunned by all witches and evil powers. It is interesting to note that one old writer informs us that the custom of "firing the bracken which grows in such quantities on the Devonshire moors" originated in the belief that setting fire to growing fern would produce rain, and was a custom much practised in the seventeenth century.

As may be supposed, a tract of land so rich in bog and stone is also rich in those forms of vegetation that thrive among such conditions, and the moors provide an ideal habitat for sedges, rushes, grasses, liverworts, mosses and lichens, the gathering of the latter being at one time something of an industry in the moorland villages, where the different varieties were scraped from the stones and converted into dyes. It is impossible even to touch upon so exhaustive a subject, but it might be mentioned that one of the most interesting mosses is the luminous or cavern moss (*Schistostega osmundaceæ*) which grows in the dark recesses of rocks and clitters, and one of the most beautiful is the red sphagnum (*S. rubellum*), whose ruby tussocks might indeed be pixy pillows.

Ferns, too, are found in many varieties, but the beautiful *Osmunda regalis* has suffered much at the hands of the spoilers and is now rarely encountered. While Dartmoor has, therefore, much to offer in the way of *Cryptogamia* and *Filices*, the same cannot be said of its trees which afford an even more restricted selection than does her flora.

Only two species may strictly be said to flourish

upon high Dartmoor, these being a few hardy varieties of willow and the mountain ash. Of the different willow species, the commonest are the white (*Salix alba*), the sallow (*S. caprea*), and the crack willows (*S. fragilis*), while the cylindrical catkins of the strange little creeping willow (*S. repens*) thrust themselves up on short twigs scarcely higher than the heather stems. The name Withy-Bush Mires, given to a well-known tract of bog-land under Waterton Tor, is a reminder of Dartmoor's most characteristic tree, for to the Devonian, every willow, no matter of what species, is a "withy" pure and simple. Even the fragrant bog-myrtle, or sweet gale, which grows plentifully in favoured localities upon the lower moorland swamps, is invariably known as "scented withy". Catkins, leaves, and tiny fruits are all equally fragrant, owing to the resinous glands that are freely distributed over the entire plant, and in former days the catkins were gathered and boiled to extract the scented wax which then rose to the surface of the water. From this deposit small candles were moulded, and it is said that such was the demand for these perfumed tapers that at one time consignments were regularly sent from the moorland villages to the Prussian Court. The experiment having been tried in my own household, I can only remark that quantities indeed of the small catkins must have been required for the production of the most minute candle, and one would presume, therefore, that the bog-myrtle must have been far more abundant than is now the case.

Apart from these species of tree or bush enumer-

ated, few others can be considered truly acclimatized to these bleak uplands. There are no indigenous firs or pines. Birch and alder shun the higher regions; Postbridge boasts a few wind-bitten beeches, while the warped, grotesque oaks of Wistman's Wood and Black Tor Copse have already been described elsewhere. Here and there in a sheltered coombe, one may come across a stray holly or stunted hawthorn, obviously owing its existence to the agency of some bird, and looking curiously forlorn as though strayed from its customary haunts.

As regards the hawthorn, it is worthy of remark that the scarlet fruits commonly known as haws are called "eagers", "agles", or "eagles" (the exact rendering of the pronunciation is difficult) by the folk of the moorland villages. Even the modern child recognizes them by no other names, and the interest lies in the fact that the word would seem to be the direct descendant of the Anglo-Saxon "haeg", meaning hedge, from which our name hawthorn, or hedge-thorn, is derived. It is strange to note how, here and there, some chance word from a language long dead survives in local parlance.

So ends the story of wild Dartmoor, her limited fauna and flora, which, after all, brings us back to the starting-point—the bleak barren upland, where the mists and the storm-winds reign supreme, and only life in its sturdiest form can triumph over the harsh conditions. So in the main the Moor has always been, even in those long bygone ages when she was a far more populous region than is the case to-day. And so she will probably remain until the end of time, though advancing civilization may

attempt by various means to change her character and even modify her climate, which is one of the results of the new afforestation schemes anticipated by the optimistic. To this one can only remark that time will prove. The vanished peoples who once inhabited her wastes did little more than scar her face, leaving nothing more than faint impressions which the healing passage of the ages has almost obliterated.

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep :

and it seems more than probable that whatever alterations time may effect, the wild rugged heart of Dartmoor will remain upon the whole little changed. It is the hope of every Nature-lover that the great rolling waste, with her indefinable charm and grey antiquity, will for ever remain, unmarred, untamed, invincible.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

---

# MOONLIGHT TALES

True stories, largely drawn from the writer's personal observation, of the romance, adventure, comedy and tragedy of wild animal and bird life. Mr. Gordon is well-known for the freshness of his observation, the vividness of his writing, and the really dramatic quality of his stories. The photographs which illustrate them are unusually good, and the creatures of the wild are revealed in all their unconscious grace and freedom.

"Mr. Gordon is one of the most satisfactory of writers about animal life. The book is illustrated by some of the best photographs of animals we have ever seen."—*Daily News*.

"Mr. Gordon presents us with reality among bird and animal life. Each tale is a delight, sometimes thrilling with the pursuit of the jungle chase, sometimes slipping into happiness with the presentation of kindly human nature."—*Morning Post*.

"The charm of the Kipling jungle books is in a new collection of stories of the wild by Mr. Gordon."—*Evening News*.

*With 8 Illustrations*

Cheap Edition. 3s. 6d. net.



## **Books on Natural History and Country Lore.**

### **WILD LIFE AT THE LAND'S END.**

By J. C. TREGARTHEN. Records and Observations of the Habits and Haunts of the Fox, Badger, Otter, Seal, etc., and of their Pursuers in Cornwall. "Has all the charm of the best conversation of a sportsman of the old school, mingled with that of a gamekeeper and a poacher." *Daily Chronicle*. Second Impression. Illustrated. 7s. 6d. net.

### **THE STORY OF A HARE.**

By J. C. TREGARTHEN. "With patience and sympathy he has been able to build up a coherent biography of a singularly elusive creature which few naturalists know. Altogether admirable." *Nature*. 3rd Impression. Illustrated. 6s. net.

### **THE LIFE STORY OF A BADGER.**

By J. C. TREGARTHEN. "The charm with which the tale is told will appeal to all. Mr. Tregarthen has the happy gift of imagination; but his artistic sense never allows his fancy to beguile him into the invention of sensational incidents without foundation in fact." *Field*. 2nd Impression. 6s. net.

### **THE LIFE STORY OF AN OTTER.**

By J. C. TREGARTHEN. "The book is one in which naturalists will especially rejoice, because they will find what cannot be found elsewhere. . . . This speaking description of Western scenery and graphic tale of the most mysterious of its denizens." *Times*. 3rd Impression. Illustrated. 6s. net.

### **THE WILD SPORTS AND NATURAL HISTORY OF THE HIGHLANDS.**

By CHARLES ST. JOHN. With Author's Notes. Memoir by the Rev. M. G. Watkins. Tenth Impression. Illus. 6s. net.

### **A COTSWOLD VILLAGE.**

By J. ARTHUR GIBBS. Portrait of the Author and other Illustrations. "It has been a real pleasure to read it." *The Guardian*. Tenth Impression. Illustrated. 7s. 6d. net.

## BIRD LIFE AND BIRD LORE.

By R. BOSWORTH SMITH. "Mr. R. Bosworth Smith has dealt with a fascinating subject in a fascinating manner." Daily Telegraph. Illustrated. 6s. net.

## THE HERON OF CASTLE CREEK AND OTHER SKETCHES OF BIRD LIFE.

By ALFRED W. REES. With a Memoir of the Author by J. K. Hudson. "It will be treasured by many a nature lover, and its usefulness will not end with one generation." Liverpool Post. With Portrait. 3s. 6d. net.

## THE STUDY OF ANIMAL LIFE.

By SIR J. ARTHUR THOMSON, M.A., LL.D. "Abounds in information set forth in an easy way. The array of facts is remarkable." Nature. New, Revised, Edition. Illus. 6s. net.

## THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME ; or, SKETCHES OF NATURAL HISTORY AND RURAL LIFE.

By RICHARD JEFFERIES. "Delightful sketches. The lover of the country can hardly fail to be fascinated." Saturday Review. 18th Impression. Illustrated. 6s. net.

## THE AMATEUR POACHER.

By RICHARD JEFFERIES. "We have rarely met with so much that is entertaining, combined with matter of real practical worth." The Graphic. 13th Impression. 6s. net.

## ROUND ABOUT A GREAT ESTATE.

By RICHARD JEFFERIES. A fascinating account of life in country villages as it used to be. 6th Impression. 6s. net.

## WILD LIFE IN A SOUTHERN COUNTY.

By RICHARD JEFFERIES. "Marvellous pictures of country sights in England. A volume to be read and re-read." The Graphic. Twelfth Impression. 6s. net.

## DOG BREAKING.

By General W. N. HUTCHINSON. The most expeditious, certain and easy method. With odds and ends for those who love the dog and gun. Popular Edition. Illustrated. 7s. 6d. net.

## DARTMOOR IN ALL ITS MOODS.

By DOUGLAS GORDON. Dartmoor—its history, customs, flora and fauna; its varying aspects in the changing seasons of the year; its grim loneliness; its streams and its bogs—Dartmoor, in short, in all its moods, has been the life study and love of the author, and no one is better qualified to write on the subject. 9s. net.

## MOONLIGHT TALES.

By DOUGLAS GORDON. "Mr. Gordon presents us with reality among bird and animal life. . . . Each tale is a delight." *Morning Post*. Illustrated. 3s. 6d. net.

## SHOOTING DAYS.

By Captain ERIC PARKER, Shooting Editor, "The Field." "A treasury of real delight to everyone who has known the free joys of moor, field, and stream." *The Spectator*. Second Impression. 7s. 6d. net.

## LETTERS TO A SALMON FISHER'S SONS.

By A. H. CHAYTOR. "We are glad to welcome a new edition of one of the best practical books on salmon fishing that has ever been written." *The Field*. Third, Revised, Edition, with an Appendix, Diagrams and Illustrations. 9s. net.

## FISHING AND SHOOTING.

By SYDNEY BUXTON. Illustrated by Archibald Thorburn. "Lucid and charming. We have not often read a book on fishing with greater interest." *Field*. Fourth Edition. 7s. 6d. net.

## PARTRIDGE DRIVING.

By CHARLES E. A. ALINGTON. Some practical hints on increasing and preserving a stock of birds and on bringing them over the guns. Second Edition. With Diagrams. 6s. net.

## THE GROUSE IN HEALTH AND IN DISEASE.

Edited by A. S. LESLIE, assisted by A. E. SHIPLEY, F.R.S. "Full of very valuable information, both to the Sportsman and the Scientist." *Field*. Illustrated. 15s. net.

A BOOK FOR ALL LOVERS OF COUNTRY  
DAYS AND COUNTRY WAYS AND THE  
HUMOURS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

# DEAR COUNTRYMEN

By S. L. BENSUSAN

With an Introduction by  
FRANCES, COUNTESS OF WARWICK

This is another volume of the popular country sketches associated with Mr. Bensusan's name—sketches familiar to readers of the *Morning Post*. He has followed his favourite division of the year—April to March—and every month has its appropriate papers. Readers will return to the company of familiar friends—the Oldest Inhabitant, Mr. Solomon Woodpecker, Mrs. Martha Ram, the Man from Mudford, and others who express themselves in the rich dialect of rural Essex, a dialect of which Mr. Bensusan is at once student and master. He lived in remote Essex in years when the dialect was in common use, and is still a diligent searcher in the by-ways for the remnant to whom it is the only form of expression. His appeal is to students of the psychology of the country folk and to lovers of laughter.

7s. 6d. net

# TIGER DAYS

By the Hon. JAMES W. BEST, O.B.E.

“Thrilling fights. A spirited and uncommon book. Vivid powers of description. . . . The only omission in this book of glad and strenuous days is a reference to the writer’s personal courage. Clearly it is enormous.”—*Star*.

*With 9 Illustrations*

7s. 6d. net

# CRICKET UP-TO-DATE

By E. H. D. SEWELL

With a Preface by LORD HAWKE

“Full of invaluable hints and sound common sense. The writer is a real expert.”—*Morning Post*.

“The author has given us much food for thought, and makes many suggestions of the utmost importance. He is very sound on the technical points of the game, as one would expect from one with his playing record: and his chapters on fielding can well be studied by all—county men as well as schoolboys.”—*Star*.

*With 23 Illustrations.*

7s. 6d. net

## *New 7/6 net Novels*

### THE MONTH OF MAY

By JANE DASHWOOD,

Author of "Three Daughters."

With Illustrative Designs by MILES HADFIELD.

A study of the events of twenty-four hours in the life of an English family, written with a delicate precision and an insight into human nature that are remarkable. A book of charm that will live long in the hearts of its readers.

### PASSIONATE INTERLUDE

By ANNE DUFFIELD,

Author of "The Lacquer Couch," "Predestined," etc.

The scene is Cairo. A young Englishman falls in love with the unspoiled and exquisite daughter of a "mixed" marriage. In the friendly, deceptive Egyptian atmosphere all seems well. But when he takes her home to the frosty traditions of his great house and the critical stare of his tweed-clad and respectable friends, illusions vanish, on both sides, with tragic suddenness. However, all ends happily, for like returns to like—and the passionate interlude is over.

### GOLDEN FOUNDLING

By SINCLAIR MURRAY,

Author of "Queer Partners," etc.

The scene of this story changes from the wilds of Canada to fashionable London. Pirrie, the foundling of the gold-seekers' trail, is transplanted to Belgrave Square, where she meets danger and difficulty, and finds love.

### THE IRONMASTER

By ALAN SULLIVAN,

Author of "The Magic Makers," etc.

Young John Driver had iron in his blood like all the men of his family, unconscious slaves of the great steel works that were their pride. John, on impulse, marries what his grandfather called a "bunch of feathers." How he became human, and found something worth more than all his roaring furnaces, is the theme of this story.

### DEAR COUNTRYMEN

By S. L. BENSUSAN

With an Introduction by FRANCES, COUNTESS OF WARWICK.

Another volume of the popular country sketches associated with Mr. Bensusan's name, which will appeal to all lovers of laughter.

## *New 7/6 net Novels*

### THE LOVE OF JULIE BOREL

By KATHLEEN NORRIS,

Author of "The Story of Julia Page," etc.

"It is always a pleasure to read Mrs. Norris' books. This is a fine story, admirably conceived, brilliantly written, calculated worthily to maintain Mrs. Norris in her undoubted right to rank as one of our leading novelists."—*Montrose Standard*.

### LUCRETIA LOMBARD

By KATHLEEN NORRIS,

Author of "The Story of Julia Page," etc.

In Lucretia Lombard Mrs. Norris has depicted a most lovable heroine. A stranger to the group into which she was suddenly thrust, Lucretia's fine character and charm and her loyalty in the face of adverse circumstances, ultimately gained her the admiration of them all.

*Second Impression.*

### GAUNTLET

By LORD GORELL,

Author of "Devil's Drum," "Devouring Fire," etc.

"Admirably written—a charming romance."—*Morning Post*.

"You will like Lord Gorell's new novel because of its originality and strong character drawing. Cecilia is a fascinating heroine."—*Bystander*.

### THE RAVENS ENTER THE HOUSE

By IVORY BURNETT.

"An excellent example of the historical novel."—*Observer*.

"May be chosen at once in preference to ten novels of modern society."—*G. K.'s Weekly*.

"One of the finest [Scottish] stories published within recent years."—*Montrose Standard*.

*Second Impression.*

### CONSCIENCE

By ACEITUNA GRIFFIN,

Author of "Genesta."

"This year, next year, we confidently tip the author as winner of the Best Selling Stakes."—*Manchester Guardian*.







AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY

---

*Accn. No.....*

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.